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Comedy and Social Change in French Cinema 1990-2010
The Rise of the Rom-com

Harrod, Mary

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**COMEDY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN
FRENCH CINEMA 1990-2010: THE RISE OF
THE ROM-COM**

Mary Harrod

PhD Thesis

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the sudden proliferation of a highly popular genre in French cinema over the past two decades. While genre cinema, French and otherwise, and especially comedy have historically been under-examined in France, this study contributes to a gradual shift towards the application of more traditionally Anglophone cultural and gender studies approaches to the analysis of French cinema. It also looks at the question of generic evolution and the relationship between domestic practice and Hollywood paradigms, including the way in which the national cinema is being reconceptualised in the face of an increasingly transnationally conceived film market.

Major lines of enquiry thus concern both the rom-com's French specificity, including the extent to which the genre is 'naturalised' and/or exported, and its representational politics, particularly with regard to gender. Is it appropriate to see the rom-com as a feminised genre in France and, if so, in what sense? How does the genre negotiate major contemporary social shifts, particularly those linked to gender? Notable here are the extension of singlehood and the increased acceptability of female autonomy; the concomitant decline of marriage; and the increased range of 'acceptable' gender roles today - especially the rise of the professional woman, which in turn has implications for masculinity and for the family unit. Do films broadly reflect and embrace such shifts or do they resist, critique or downplay them? Finally, how are these questions inflected by considering production and reception contexts, as well as the issue of gendered authorship? In seeking to answer such questions, the thesis encompasses analysis of both formal aspects of the genre and specific narrative details. In so doing it hopes to pinpoint some of the ways in which the French rom-com has been mediating perceptions of key social trends over the past two decades, both at home and ultimately globally.

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INTRODUCTION

French filmmaking and love stories have gone hand in hand since the beginning. However, a form of film more readily identifiable with the internationally recognisable rom-com genre than were earlier examples has proliferated in France in the 1990s and 2000s. On the one hand, this development can be seen in the context of the increasingly transnational character of cinema. On the other, the phenomenon coincides with a period characterised by an identity crisis unprecedented in human history, one with both a global reach and specific resonance in France, provoked by the movement away from clearly delineated gender roles (Badinter 2010: 12). Since romantic comedy is a genre focused on coupling culture, its French variant can be expected to respond to this crisis. For these reasons, this thesis seeks to examine the factors behind and implications of the spectacular rise of the rom-com in France in the 1990s and 2000s from the perspective of social change, as it pertains to the film industry and to the issue of generic definitions, as well as more generally in terms of representations.

In probing the significance of the contemporary French rom-com, this study not only takes stock of a new development; it also represents an intervention into the field of French film studies, in that popular cinema (and comedy in particular) originating in France has to date suffered from neglect by scholarly research. According to Richard Abel, ‘most historians would agree that it was the French who almost singlehandedly created film comedy’ (1984: 220). Moreover, Susan Hayward has shown how the genre has consistently outperformed others in the domestic

market and, specifically, been a key factor in the national mainstream cinema's success since 1990, accounting for at least 50 per cent of domestic box office takings to 2002. Since then, too, the genre has year on year accounted for the lion's share of production (between 20 and 35%) and comedies have featured in similar proportions in the nation's annual box office top 20. No wonder, then, that Hayward remarks on the need for 'an extended analysis of the processes and ideological function of French comedy', at the time of her writing and still nearly two decades later 'conspicuous by its absence' (2005 [1993]: 304-6). By analysing one subgroup within French comedy – and, as we shall see, a significant, pervasive and commercially impactful one – my thesis represents a contribution towards redressing the balance between French comedy's enormous popularity and its widespread exclusion from academic enquiry.

Prominent early precursors to the current French rom-com trend begin appearing as early as the end of the 1980s, with a film by feminist popular auteur Coline Serreau, hit inter-class romance *Romuald et Juliette/Mama, There's a Man in Your Bed* (1989), leading the way. Serreau's film doubtless influenced the wave of female auteur rom-coms appearing in the 1990s, directed by the likes of Chantal Akerman, Josiane Balasko, Catherine Corsini and Tonie Marshall (see also the appended filmography of contemporary French rom-coms). By the start of the 2000s, other directors of both genders were making rom-coms that not only achieved domestic success but also relatively substantial international distribution, bringing greater global visibility to the genre. These include *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), *Décalage horaire/Jet Lag* (Danièle Thompson, 2002), *Prête-moi ta main/I Do* (Eric Lartigau, 2006), *Hors de prix/Priceless* (Pierre Salvadori, 2006), *De vrais mensonges/Beautiful Lies*

(Salvadori, 2010) and *L'Arnacoeur/Heartbreaker* (Pascal Chaumeil, 2010). These successes cemented the genre's firmly established status as a relatively common form of French production by the end of the 2000s. So much so, in fact, that the term *comédie romantique* has become standardised in press and marketing campaigns and even filtered down to made-for-television films (see for example Germain 2010). Nonetheless, the fact that as recently as 2008 the two French film scholars to remark on the trend, Raphaëlle Moine and Brigitte Rollet, were still describing it as nascent (Moine 2008) or even 'an extremely rare and recent phenomenon' (Rollet 2008: 92) suggests that the speed with which the traditionally foreign genre has caught on has been so dizzying that academe has had trouble keeping up. This makes a scholarly exploration of the contemporary French rom-com all the more timely.

Two further, more specific factors in the rom-com's French efflorescence emerge from this summary: the number of female directors working in the national industry, and the genre's commercial potential. As concerns the first of these, a cursory look at the rom-com filmography of the past two decades suggests that at least a third of films (more in the 1990s) were directed by women. This is a high figure even in the context of a country where female directors have been responsible for between 14 and 19% of overall production during the period (compared with 9% in Hollywood in 1998, falling to only 5% in 2010).¹ Although filmed romantic comedy was not originally conceived as geared to female audiences in particular, it has consistently been theorised as a genre with specific relevance for women, given their historical circumscription to cultural narratives of heterosexual coupling and family life, and especially thanks to the substantial roles the format has offered

¹ For France, Carrie Tarr with Rollet (2001:1) cite 14% for the 1990s; Kate Ince (2008: 281) cites around 14.4% for the years 2000-2007 and Ginette Vincendeau (2010) finds this to rise to 19.4% in the year 2009, all basing data on CNC statistics; for Hollywood, see Lauzen (2012).

actresses. Moreover, as several rom-com critics have noted, recent decades have seen a turn towards assigning to rom-com a more exclusively feminine address in the context of post-*Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, USA 1990) Hollywood (Garrett 2007: 121; Ferriss and Young 2008a; Burns 2011).

Mobilising the tropes of romantic comedy has certainly been a factor in the considerable box office revenues garnered by French women directors, particularly in the 2000s (see also Harrod 2012: 227-8). Indeed, the second immediate explanation for the genre's burgeoning at this particular time in France concerns precisely the explosive success of the global (primarily Hollywood) genre in the 1980s and 1990s – including in France, where films like *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, USA 1989) and *Pretty Woman* attracted massive audiences (1.9 and 4 million tickets sold respectively).² It is no wonder that French producers and directors should seek to emulate such profitability in their home market, not least given comedy's popularity during eras characterised by the kind of social division and, latterly, financial crisis that France has known over the period in question. The fact that French comic genres do not typically require huge budgets (by contrast with the situation in Hollywood and with other popular French genres such as heritage biopics [*La Môme/La Vie en rose* (Olivier Dahan, 2007), *Coco avant Chanel/Coco Before Chanel* (Anne Fontaine, 2009)] and special effects films [*Micmacs à tire-larigot/Micmacs* (Jeunet, 2009)]) makes them all the more appealing for commercially-oriented filmmakers.

However, such an exclusively industrial angle does not tell the whole story. As both the thesis title and my early allusion to Badinter's socio-philosophical work on French society suggest, this study subscribes to the widely held view of genre as

² Figures sourced from Simsi (2000).

‘a functional interface between the cinematic institution, audiences, *and the wider realm of culture*’ (Krutnik 1990: 57; my emphasis). This perspective does not ignore the complexities involved in speculating about exact relations between film texts and the social world, and specifically the limitations of top-down, ‘mass society’ theses, limitations foregrounded by now familiar but nonetheless highly significant 1970s studies by such media scholars as Ian Jarvie (1970; 1978) and Andrew Tudor (1974) (or, in a French context, albeit less explicitly and fully, Pierre Sorlin [1977]), as well as the 1990s turn towards reception studies. While these critics distance themselves from earlier readings that assumed uncomplicated recognition of single patterns of meaning, they nonetheless recognise the ongoing value of – inevitably subjective – critical analyses of film texts from a socio-historical point of view. As Tudor has put it:

In dramatising [a society’s] traits the movies participate in a continual and complex social process. They articulate for us the bases of our social lives; they give us the underlying irregularities of our societies’ concrete form. They are both reflection and cause; a link in a closed circle. (1974: 218)

In accordance with the recognition that films both reflect and feed back into social change, this study will attempt to sample and shed light on this ‘circular’ dynamic, and thus contemporary French cultural history, as it is manifested through the phenomenon of national romantic comedy. In so doing it is hoped that it will elucidate the reasons for and implications of the rom-com’s appropriation by French filmmakers in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the ways in which the genre contributes to films’ widely recognised role in establishing cultural norms – in this case notably, if certainly not exclusively, ‘defin[ing] and demonstrat[ing] socially

sanctioned ways of falling in love' (Wright-Wexman 1993: ix). In order to begin to ask more specific questions about the genre, however, it is first necessary to elaborate on precisely what are the characteristics of the films designated when I refer to a recently emerging French rom-com genre.

CORPUS AND CONTEXTS

The notorious difficulty of generic definition may be particularly acute when it comes to rom-com. Brian Henderson (1978: 1) has suggested that the very reason several major generic inventories do not include it as a distinct category is that the frequency with which romance and comedy occur across Hollywood production makes this genre extremely hard to pin down. (More interestingly, David R. Shumway argues that the ubiquity of romance as a major or secondary plot line in Hollywood films of the studio era – occurring in about 90 per cent of cases according to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson – must be attributable to the fact that audiences were already invested in romance narratives about themselves, allowing them to see the films as narrative representations of 'real' desires [Shumway 2003a: 85].) This situation is compounded by the term's liberal use as a highly 'saleable' marketing label as much as any reflection of a film's content. Nonetheless, various theorists have hazarded attempts to categorise the genre. These range from extreme generalities (Krutnik's [2002: 133] argument that rom-com pivotally hinges on the question of love) to 'master' definitions (Jeffers McDonald 2007: 9) that are by nature constricting. Although I will situate my own understanding of rom-com more fully in relation to recent scholarship on the genre in Chapter 1, one structural feature that recurs in descriptions of rom-com and is relevant to pinning down the key traits of the recent French trend is the broadly equal allocation of narrative space to male

and female characters (see for example Neale and Krutnik 1990: 139; Rowe 1995: 109). Celestino Deleyto (1998: 137) has qualified this observation with the important caveat that in practice one point of view tends to dominate. Nonetheless, such textual architecture may be viewed as relatively egalitarian in comparison with that of most other Hollywood genres (female-centred melodramas providing an important exception), which, historically, have privileged a focus on men.

The contrast with French cinematic history is even starker. According to Moine (2008), the closest French cinema comes to romantic comedy in the classical era is the *comédie boulevardière*, or vaudeville comedy. As also noted by Sellier (1999a), these comedies were generally structured around the amorous adventures of a male character: a star performer, usually from a theatre background, for whom the stories – often theatrical adaptations – were vehicles. Films starring and directed by Sacha Guitry are emblematic. Female characters in this schema were subordinate, smaller roles played by performers who were less well-known, and often much younger, than the men with whom they were paired, making them prime examples of the on-screen portrayal of ‘incestuous’ coupling identified with the films of that period by Ginette Vincendeau (1988). The contrast with the contemporaneous Hollywood screwball comedy, animated by feisty heroines and powerful actresses, is apparent. For Moine, the major differences between these two filmic frameworks for the exploration of heterosexual love explain the relative absence of US remakes of French films into romantic comedies (she counts only three out of more than 70 remakes ever).

This argument finds support in later research by both Vincendeau (1992) and Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier (1996) showing that the incestuous narrative, if less dominant, is still a powerful one in the decades since the 1930s. Sellier (1999b)

has also described a pervasive strain of misogyny in the popular cinema of the 1950s. As for her earlier (1997) work on New Wave films, here she suggests that, where female roles are not kept to a minimum, the woman is portrayed with pity and disdain.³ Vincendeau (2000b: 112-20) has nuanced Sellier's assessment, arguing that the New Wave did at least release women characters from the homestead, but she also notes the misogyny underlying the unpleasant fates reserved for many of them, as well as their frequent objectification. Recalling Laura Mulvey's (1975: 14) claims about narrative cinema's fetishism and voyeurism vis-à-vis female characters, this highlights the important point that women's mere presence does not necessarily imply concern for issues particular to them. Indeed, dispossessed of narration and gaze, female characters may be little more than what Vincendeau calls 'phantasmic male projections' (2000b: 113). It is the relatively equal allotment of narrative *subjectivity*, that has been seen to typify rom-com, that 1960s French cinema was still some way off tolerating. This has for the most part continued to be the case in mainstream comedy at any rate, up until the emergence of the current spate of rom-coms, with male duos reigning even more supremely in France than in Hollywood. Thus exemplary male buddy comedies – with openly misogynistic elements – including *La Beuze/The Dope* (François Desagnat and Thomas Sorriaux, 2003), *Brice de Nice/The Brice Man* (James Huth, 2005), *La Doublure/The Valet* (Francis Veber, 2006), *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis/Welcome to the Sticks* (Dany Boon, 2008) and *Rien à déclarer/Nothing to Declare* (Boon, 2010) have all featured in the box office top ten in just the 2000s (with the trend being pursued beyond the decade by the blockbuster hit *Intouchables/Untouchable* [Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011]).

³ An updated version of this argument appears in English in Sellier (2008).

The contemporary cycle of films that provide the focus of this thesis represent a major change in this regard: it is principally their promotion of female points of view, alongside their mobilisation of other rom-com features, that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 1 – notably a light-hearted approach to love viewed at once as miraculous transformation and yet also as socially contingent – that identifies them with the global genre and renders appropriate their analysis from within its purview. Additionally, as we will see in Chapter 5 especially, many films include explicit acknowledgements of their debt to Hollywood, through intertextual references.

The promotion of female subjectivity by the French rom-com, taken in conjunction with female filmmakers' widespread participation in the genre, clearly says something about changing gender roles in contemporary France – as indeed does the high proportion of narratives of female rebellion (as well as, later, of male riposte) discussed in Chapter 3. Such observations begin to add detail to the schematic suggestion made earlier that the genre arises in part from women's greater access to professional equality in the film industry (among others). As suggested, the ways in which the genre mediates social anxiety arising from such changes is the principal concern of this thesis; but it is nonetheless as well to state clearly from the outset that the genre's explosion is itself viewed here as a measure of acutely heightened tensions around the role of men and women, in couple formations and in society as a whole, in France in the 1990s and 2000s. This is perhaps no surprise in a context where gender equality has historically lagged significantly behind that of the US (or Britain). For example, French women were not allowed to manage property and income until the early 1900s, nearly a century after most of their North American sisters, and they did not achieve suffrage until 1944, a full quarter of a

century behind the latter. In more recent years, too, relative equality in some spheres has been coupled with a firmly embedded loyalty to the notion of gender difference in other aspects of life. For example, the major feature distinguishing French from Anglophone schools of feminism historically has been the former's focus on championing feminine specificity, as opposed to stressing equality. This focus on feminine specificity, and concomitant celebration of motherhood (see also Chapter 4) has arguably posed relatively few challenges to existing designations of gender roles: as Christine Bard (1999a: 304) has chronicled, '[those advocating a 'feminine identity' were accused] of excessively reinforcing difference to the overall benefit of patriarchy'. At the same time, while marriage in Western culture has been in 'crisis' – with divorce rates rising – for well over a century, it is generally acknowledged that second-wave feminism and the attack on traditional values of the 1960s provoked particular disturbances in the conventions of marriage and intimate relationships. France's historical allegiance to the Catholic Church may initially have fortified the institution of marriage more solidly against the challenges posed within its borders by liberalism than was the case in Britain or the US. In recent years, though, France has had the lowest per capita annual marriage rate of any country in Europe (around 50 per 10,000 citizens [Hampshire 2008: 398]). In other words, there appears to have occurred in France a delayed reaction to the liberal gains achieved elsewhere over thirty years ago; it is my contention that this reaction is strikingly visible in the unprecedentedly high rom-com output of the last 20 years.

In support of this argument, I will suggest in Chapter 2 that 'nervousness' around romance akin to that visible in North American culture in the 1970s is partly responsible for some of the differences that separate the contemporary French and global rom-coms. The most notable of these concerns the prevalence of 'dark'

elements, associable with both the melodramatic and realist traditions, in the French genre. This observation echoes the identification of key features by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, in a coextensive new trend for romantic films in European cinema to which I shall refer in Chapter 1, which they situate in relation to the literary heritage of European naturalism. Looking further back into French literary history does shed light on the texture of the contemporary film genre: importantly, a mistrust of laughter is exemplified within France's literary and especially dramatic canon by a bias towards narrative-based definitions of comedy (Frederick 1973; Greene 1977) and an adjuvant tendency to include relatively sober material within the category. Thus in their attempt to define film comedy, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990: 13-4) cite the emergence in several European countries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of a new genre in high bourgeois theatre, in France known as the *comédie larmoyante*, or tearful comedy, as evidence of comedy's close parentage with melodrama. Moreover the tendency to mix comedy and drama is still in evidence today in French film criticism today, through, for example, the prevalence of the label *comédie dramatique* or dramatic comedy – much more common than the closest English-language equivalent *comedy-drama* and often used to distinguish a film from both more overt *comédies* and the overwhelmingly un-comic *drame psychologique* (psychological drama). Nor is it by chance that when Geoff King (2002: 10) seeks in turn to illustrate global comedy's potentially melodramatic penchant, it is again the French context – this time Serreau's 1992 film *La Crise/The Crisis* – that is invoked. Several film theorists have explored the close links between melodrama and comedy, including rom-com, in a general way (Rowe 1995: 95-116; Thomas 2000), while within a French context Martin O'Shaughnessy has written suggestively about the considerable overlap

between melodrama and realism (2007: 131-6). Certainly literary naturalism, characterised by its most famous French exponent Émile Zola in terms of inexorable progress towards a predetermined, usually dire, end, smacks less of the fibre of everyday life (one possible definition of realism) than of dramatic contrivance designed to engage the viewer in characters' suffering (as in classic melodramas in all forms of fiction).

In any case, while Hollywood rom-coms from *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, USA 1993) to *500 Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, USA 2009) are no stranger to melodrama – indeed its presence in the genre may even be on the increase in recent years (Jeffers Macdonald 2007: 85) – it is true that this mode appears to a striking extent as the default second register of the French genre. *Se souvenir des belles choses/Beautiful Memories* (Zabou Breitman, 2001) is a salient example of this, where the romance is played out in the melodramatic setting of a mental institution, between a woman with a degenerative brain disease and a man who has lost his memory. The rom-com's traditional 'happy ending', with the man declaring an affirmation of love, is undermined in this narrative by the use of slow-motion and asynchronous sound to evoke the woman's experience of his words as disconnected." Nonetheless the film's rom-com identity is acknowledged by the fact that Rollet included it in a list of films of the current French cycle provided at a presentation given by her (2010).

The force of recognising overtly incongruous elements as common in the French rom-com is to broaden the scope of the corpus I propose to analyse here. That is, while on the one hand a crop of films substantially different from predecessors appears in the national cinema in the 1990s and multiplies in the 2000s, it is simultaneously the case that my study relies on a flexible understanding of rom-com

itself, to be further elaborated in Chapter 1. This creates space for the analysis of films not necessarily ostentatiously identifiable with the global label ‘rom-com’ in a highly self-conscious way alongside those that are: a two-pronged approach to probing the significance of films that engage with contemporary social reality around coupling culture in France. This is entirely consonant with rom-com studies globally, where – as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 2 – heterogeneity characterises the genre at the synchronic as well as the diachronic level. Pushing the boundaries of the genre in this way reveals the specific new directions being taken by its French version. Such a move answers to Neale’s (1995: 167) call for greater research into generic evolution and transformation within different institutional contexts. Reversing the coin, the value of an inclusive approach can be in revealing particularities about the culture in which films are produced, both filmic and beyond.

To summarise, my interest in the French rom-com spans both purely generic contexts and the social – domains that have a bearing on one another. A major line of enquiry for the thesis concerns its French specificity, including how this may evolve over the period and the extent to which the genre is ‘naturalised’ and/or exported, with repercussions for understanding global film traffic. Thinking about the genre’s identity raises too the question of the stars who populate it and how we might therefore assess its representational politics. Building on such areas of interrogation, my statements about female authorship in the French genre, as well as the newness of privileging female subjectivity to any extent in national comedy, beg several further questions about exactly *how* the two genders are constructed in films. Is it appropriate to see the rom-com as a particularly feminised genre in France and, if so, in what precise sense? These questions transcend the simple issue of any split in focus and point of view between the genders, instead pairing this structural question

with analysis of both story arcs and specific narrative details. In this vein, how does the genre negotiate major contemporary social shifts, particularly those most obviously linked to gender? Notable here are the extension of singlehood and the increased acceptability of female autonomy especially; the concomitant decline of marriage; and the increased range of acceptable gender roles today – particularly the rise of the professional woman, which in turn has huge implications for masculinity and for the family, a key unit of social organisation. Do films broadly reflect and embrace such shifts or do they resist, critique or downplay them, as comedy has often been accused of doing? Finally, how are the articulations of these questions inflected by considering production and reception contexts, including films' status as auteur or mainstream fare – which suggest slightly different target audiences – as well as the issue of gendered authorship? By considering questions such as these and how their answers may evolve over the period in question, the thesis hopes to pinpoint some of the ways in which the French rom-com has been mediating and shaping perceptions of key social trends over the past two decades or so, both at home and ultimately globally.

METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

Having outlined the parameters of this thesis, it remains to clarify in a little more detail its methodology and organisation. Given my focus on the relationship between film and society, the study is at pains to walk a delicate line between textual and contextual detail, as well as to point to links between the two. At the same time, within film analysis it seeks to strike a reasonable balance between picking out meta-trends across texts and the desire to be more than an encyclopaedic overview of a large body of films. This means it ranges from, on occasion, relatively scientific

statements about narrative and aesthetic patterns, to fuller explorations of the possible implications for spectators of concrete textual constructions, the latter through both fairly extended analyses embedded in subsections and separate, even more thoroughgoing case studies of individual films. With respect to both these strategies, while I have already rejected the structuralist approach whereby narrative patterns equate to fixed textual meanings, I nonetheless propose certain theoretical subject positions, or readings, for consumers of the films in question. Without suggesting such interpretations are the only possible options for viewers, certain popular texts characterised by a high degree of narrative explicitness do seem designed to elicit preferred or dominant readings (see Hall 1980). At the same time, my interpretations are supported by reference to production and especially reception data, typically in the form of press materials, since ethnographic audience studies – including even admissions figures broken down by age or gender – do not by and large exist in France (and undertaking them myself is beyond the scope of this already wide-ranging research). In other words, the analysis is at the interface of historical materialist and more purely theoretical, textually-based stances.

In terms of organisation, the remainder of the thesis is divided into five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 constitutes a survey of the principal directions taken by scholarship on romantic comedy and adjacent genres, beginning with the global picture before narrowing the enquiry down to France. Since a major theme of this chapter is the dearth of academic scholarship on the film genre, this includes reference to literary and cultural studies where these prove germane. Throughout this section, the position of my own work is situated in relation to relevant paradigms. In Chapter 2, I begin examining the corpus itself, here by focusing on romance's role in contemporary society, globally and especially in France. In the first half of the

chapter, this involves putting romance into dialogue with other important societal shifts relating to demographic patterns and to identity in the late 20th and early 21st century, as they are negotiated by the French rom-com; in the second, I interrogate the ways in which romantic discourse itself has evolved in relation to films of the corpus. Chapter 3 attempts to isolate the ways in which specific, gendered identities – that is, feminine, masculine and alternative positions – are configured by the genre and how such constructions may reflect and bear on the roles deemed acceptable for and by French people today. In Chapter 4, the rom-com is approached from the point of view of its articulation of concerns about the French family today: an archetypal topos of the domestic popular cinema. Finally, in Chapter 5 I place the French genre in a transnational context, both in the sense of interrogating in more detail its relation to Hollywood predecessors (both actual and perceived, including via a reception analysis focusing on reviews and other press relating to films) and also by probing its role in feeding back into transnational generic flows, and therefore mass consciousness. My conclusion attempts to answer as far as possible the questions posed in this introduction, as well as related but more concrete ones raised by the research process itself.

As touched on, each subsequent chapter includes a case study analysing in some depth a film relevant to the concerns under discussion. The exception to this is Chapter 3, because of this chapter's division into subsections equating to different gender roles. This means that no single film is well placed to emblematised particularly fully all the different identity issues at stake; therefore, a number of shorter analyses of various texts has been preferred in this case. In the other three chapters, the choice of film is determined both by the pertinence of intra-textual detail to the chapter's broad themes and also by a desire to represent films positioned

differently at the extra-textual, film-cultural level – particularly in terms of the degree of their popular identity (rather than simply popularity), which is bound up with the question of their directors' status as auteurs or otherwise. For this reason, Chapter 2 features a highly critically acclaimed, award-winning film by veteran auteur Tonie Marshall, *Vénus Beauté (Institut)/Venus Beauty Salon* (1999); Chapter 4 a film that was a moderate domestic box office success for well-known but mainstream screenwriter-turned-director Danièle Thompson, *La Bûche/Season's Beatings* (1999); and Chapter 5 a massive transnational hit for previously unknown television director Pascal Chaumeil, *L'Arnacoeur/Heartbreaker* (2010). Chronologically, these three films may not appear to fan out in a perfectly neat way across the two decades; however, the fact that, as I have argued, the genre really takes off towards the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s shifts them to more significant positions along the timeline, almost bookending the period. In any case, not only do they span different sub-cyclical areas of concern, in ways that will become apparent, but they are complemented within chapters by numerous shorter analyses of films released earlier and in between. On the topic of chronology more generally, it is perhaps worth noting that, despite the thesis' nominal and principal focus on the years 1990-2010, given the artificial nature of such a division when attempting to apprehend slow and subtle historical shifts, on occasion I include mention of films that either just precede or follow the period, to contextualise developments and draw out their possible significance into the present and future.

As my choice of case studies reflects, in the thesis as a whole, box office performance is one basis, but not the only one, on which films are singled out for more sustained analyses. The study certainly takes viewing figures into consideration, in view of mass texts' great potential to influence social change; and

box office data is quoted where I deem it to be particularly striking or relevant. However, the criterion is not applied to the exclusion of all others, partly because I am also interested in generic development itself: an evolution whose interrelation with wider culture is complex. For example, texts with smaller audiences can still make great impact on film culture and therefore influence other directors in way that filter down into broader patterns. The growth of the home video market has also attenuated the importance of box office figures somewhat. Finally, it is also the case that a poor box office performance can be telling about social attitudes. For all these reasons, films have been chosen through a combination of considering their impact in a quantitative way but also for the relevance of the topics they broach and themes they explore. In general, I have attempted as far as possible to maintain objectivity in picking out trends and their implications, not least by continuously referencing a spread of differently positioned films.

Finally, a note on bibliographical and filmographical references. In the first case, while source details throughout the thesis are as complete as possible, a number of daily and weekly press references do not indicate a page number. This is because they were obtained from the database at Bifi (Bibliothèque du Film) in which the scanning of articles has deleted page numbers. Readers wishing to consult the full articles are directed to the Bifi Library (51 rue de Bercy, 75012 – Paris), which offers fast and convenient online access to the material. The Bnf, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Site François-Mitterrand, Quai François-Mauriac, 75013 – Paris) holds full issues of the papers. For film references, within the text I have opted, the first time a film is mentioned, to give the full French title and English translation where available, along with director details and year of production. The country of production is included only when this is not France (or France in

combination with others). For subsequent references only the French title (or a commonsense abbreviation of this) is given. For non-French titles, I have given only the English-language title in the main text. The two appended filmographies - of both all the films referenced in the work and an indicative rom-com list for the period - include all details.

CHAPTER 1

ROMANTIC COMEDY - AND ITS DISCONTENTS

This chapter is concerned with definitions of romantic comedy and the specificity and status of its French variant. To this end, I survey academic literature in romance and comedy studies, as well as on French cinema, and indicate how my research relates to this existing body of scholarly work. As we shall see, however, the chapter's central theme is the deprecation of rom-com as an object worthy of study and its consequent scholarly neglect, globally and in France particularly.

ROMANTIC COMEDY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

There are reasons to believe that romantic comedy as a genre may be particularly well equipped to negotiate external cultural developments. As Roberta Garrett has recently observed in a discussion of the contemporary global genre, over the years key rom-com studies – including those by Frank Krutnik (1990, 1998), Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans (1989), Steve Neale (1992), Tina Olsin Lent (1995), Kathleen Rowe (1995), Charles Musser (1995) and David R. Shumway (2003b) – have offered ‘a degree of critical consensus [...] concerning the historical specificity of and formal distinctions between cycles such as the early comedy of remarriage (1920s-1930s), the screwball comedy (1930s-1940s), the sex-comedy (1950s-1960s) and the nervous romance (1970s)’ (2007: 96). In other words, throughout its theorisations rom-com has typically been seen as *by definition* a genre dealing with the shifts in gender roles and relations that have occurred during

different periods. To understand why, it is helpful to look beyond the cinema to literary and cultural studies scholarship on comedy and romance.

Literary and Cultural Studies Approaches

The comic component of the rom-com's identity is important in understanding the genre's social relevance. A running theme of the many and diverse literary theories of comedy put forward since the Classical period is the latter's essentially social status and import; hence, recently, Umberto Eco (1984: 4) joins a long tradition in contrasting comedy's historical contingency with tragedy's eternal themes. This relevance is perhaps most obvious when it comes to satire. In France, critiques of contemporary regimes, philosophies and mores by eighteenth century satirists like Voltaire and Diderot are exemplary. But even the most seemingly trivial jokes frequently rely on immediate context for their import. Freud himself, who is often accused of an ahistorical bent, cannot avoid tying his discussion of the varying conditions in which innuendo might occur to social class, historical era and especially gender, when he designates certain jokes a way of oppressing women (Freud 2002: 96-7).

If context is all-important when it comes to comedy, by the same logic comedy can be profoundly revealing about the social world in which it is produced. Not only does 'comic insulation' (Palmer 1987: 45) – the protective layer afforded by comedy's apparent frivolousness – allow it to broach topics that might be taboo in more 'serious' registers; comedy in fact tends to accumulate around such sites of difficulty or anxiety, as it is the tension generated by these that jokes can be seen to exploit. This makes comic texts highly instructive about a society's norms and values, both official and internalised. Significantly, it also lends these texts

importance in influencing cultural change. To put it another way, while mass texts in general shape perceptions of social trends, the fact that comic texts tend to deal with particularly contentious issues makes their precise implications for audiences of paramount social relevance. As with any filmmaking practice, this obtains as much at the industrial level, concerning the role played by particular social groups in the creation of cinematic comedy, as with regard to the (related) question of texts' individual politics, representational and beyond.

As for romance, this term presents a dualistic profile, as both cultural and fictional narrative. Although romantic discourse is hardly alone here, this situation results in a markedly high degree of inter-permeability between the two realms. The ubiquity with which the notion of romantic love appears in contemporary Western fiction is certainly a measure of its enduringly irresistible allure. As observed in a study of literary romance in twentieth-century France, despite the cultural shift away from marriage towards 'more sequential and complex family structures', an investment in love as a mutual commitment based on passionate desire and affinity is a major feature of contemporary culture (Holmes 2006: 115). So much so that, as global rom-com scholar Deleyto puts it, 'we have forgotten that [romance] is [...] an "invention" of a group of Provençal poets at the end of the eleventh century' (Deleyto 2003: 167). His discussions here and elsewhere (2009a; Evans and Deleyto 1998) focus on this discourse's capacity for adapting to circumstance, as is apparent in various other interventions on the subject (see for example Foucault 1981; Giddens 1992; Pearce and Stacey 1995: 12) – by contrast (as Deleyto notes) with earlier accounts of the genre as transcending history (Frye 1957; 1965), or more recently as a framework for anchoring other cultural transformations in place (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 171). Michel Foucault's work as a whole has emphasised the way

in which even the most apparently ‘unreal’ (one meaning of *romantic* in common parlance) stories feed into dominant attitudes, while sociologist of romance Anthony Giddens (1992: 45) – moving away from Foucault’s stress on the overpowering and totalitarian nature of the ideas and models circulated by discourse – has suggested that it is narrative’s very fictional status that may allow its consumer to use it consciously as a hypothetical model.

Certainly it is often within the field of romance that apposite examples of the influence of ostentatiously contrived fiction upon the social world present themselves. To cite one, historians generally agree that novels were the principal means by which a romantic conception of marriage became widespread in nineteenth century North America (May 1980: 75-6) – the same tendency satirised contemporaneously in France by Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (2002 [1856]). In fact, Jarvie looked to the example of romantic discourse in defending movies’ influence despite their potential plurality of meaning, arguing that the concept of romantic love may have greatly helped adolescents to make sense of and cope with emotions that are relatively unrestrained in children (Jarvie 1978: 37). In contemporary French cinema, the realisation that ‘romanticism and realism can co-exist at different levels of our subjectivities’ (Jackson 1995: 56) is already a hallmark of many auteur films and is particularly highly visible in the contemporary tendency towards imaginative ‘autofiction’ in films by female directors from Maïwenn to Mia Hansen-Løve, as well as in many romantic comedies discussed in this thesis.⁴

Romantic fiction’s potential power to infiltrate cultural discourse has not always predisposed it to enthusiastic scholarly appreciation, any more than has

⁴ Auteur director Marion Vernoux has discussed the usefulness of romance as a trope for making sense of real experience (Dobson 2010).

comedy's superficially light-hearted approach to serious subjects. Instead, the rom-com has suffered as a genre from being critically written off as irrelevant or pernicious, sometimes both at the same time. This is inextricable from the prejudice operating towards most forms of popular diversion as 'only entertainment' (Dyer 1992) – especially genres perceived as 'feminine', as part of misogynistic currents operating in patriarchal society. In some ways paradoxically, though, perhaps most significant in shaping critical attitudes to the romance genre for several decades in the post-war period has been second wave feminists' condemnation of its narratives, which can idealise the heterosexual couple, as a tool of patriarchal oppression (see for example Beauvoir, 2004 [1949]; Millet 1969; Firestone 1979 [1971]; Greer 1971). However, works like the literary studies of Tania Modleski (1990 [1982]) and Janice Radway (1991 [1984]), or Ien Ang's (1985) influential study of the viewing patterns of the soap opera *Dallas*, have subsequently rehabilitated romance as a forum for women to explore their identities, emotional lives and life experiences. Such work does not overlook the limitations arguably imposed by the happy ending around coupling constructed by the traditional romance (a point to which I shall return), reasserting the universal law of kinship and a power structure in which woman has always been subordinate; hence Radway concludes that for women romance represents 'a minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest' (1991: 222).

A similar battle over the progressive or revisionist status of female-oriented romance has been waged in the post-feminist period around the phenomena of 'chick-lit', 'chick television' and 'chick-flicks'. Scholars such as Yvonne Tasker and especially Diane Negra (2004; 2008; Tasker and Negra 2007) have suggested that within these genres, whose current manifestations are thought to have proliferated

following the success of the British novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding 1996; see Ferriss and Young 2006: 5), any positive value for female viewers is severely attenuated, in ways that are bound up with the centrality of romance to chick texts. Other analysts of chick culture have placed more emphasis on the substantial pleasures and specific forms of empowerment such narratives offer to female consumers (Ferris and Young 2008a: 4). Notably, several commentators on the global blockbuster book, television and film series *Sex and the City* have emphasised its celebration of female desire and friendship (Henry 2004; Akass and McCabe 2004; Jermyn 2009). While it is undeniable that rom-coms are structurally predisposed towards endorsing heterosexual coupling, and I agree with the view that many postfeminist fictions promote values that are disempowering for a broad spectrum of women, my own position with regard to the politics of romantic comedy is in some respects closer to these latter studies. I seek in any case to interrogate the variegated and complex stories of the French rom-coms under examination in order to assess fully their textual and contextual specificity and historical inscription.

Rom-Com as a Cinematic Genre

The *Sex and the City* film franchise provides a prime example of texts around which critical discourse has tended to conflate as more or less synonymous the chick-flick and the rom-com (cf. Mortimer 2010: 1). The difference is one of value, with 'chick-flicks' tending to be more easily written off as of limited interest. The film genre designated by these terms brings with it a specific history of cinematic studies, until now alluded to only in passing.

As hinted, critical denigration and neglect have also pervaded scholarship in this area, perhaps even more than in the case of written romance. This situation is in

part a function of the culturally illegitimate status of comedy within staged fiction as a whole, which Moine (2002: 27-8) has dated back to Aristotle's designation of comedy as a low form – in France via the neo-classical theatre's stigmatisation of the 'bourgeois laughter' associated with the farces of Feydeau and Labiche. In film studies, though, further double standards apply. Firstly, earlier comedy has been the subject of considerably more literature than more recent texts. This may be partly ascribable to the fact that social relevance becomes easier to pick out with hindsight. Kristina Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (1995: 2) have also pointed out the facility with which comedy, frequently defined by an infantile, ludic quality, becomes a site for nostalgia, perhaps further influencing scholars' positive attitudes towards comedy of past eras. Additionally, biases in favour of auteurs mean that figures like Buster Keaton or Jacques Tati (who directed as well as starred in their films) receive the most praise and attention from both critics and scholars.

Within rom-com studies specifically (and probably talking comedy as a whole), it is certainly romantic comedy of the classical 'screwball' era that has received the greatest volume of attention in film studies. This cycle of films has been the subject of studies by Stanley Cavell (1981), Wes Gehring (1986), Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans (1989), Tina Olsin Lent (1995), Manuela Ruiz Pardos (2000), Kathrina Glitre (2001), David R. Shumway (2003b) and others, with some generic inventories privileging only this version of romantic comedy (see for example Schatz 1981: 150-85). These analyses bring out the rom-com genre's heterogeneity, since within merely one cycle an umbrella term has brought together films as diverse as didactic social comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, USA 1941) and domestic farce *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, USA 1949), through features ranging from a utopian dissolution of class divisions (ibid) to the promotion of play

as an expression of intimacy, reflecting new, post-Victorian ideals of companionate love (Lent 1995; Ruiz Pardo 2000) and a concomitant loosening of restrictions on female freedom, both within texts and through the rise of a slew of actresses to billing on an equal footing with men (Gehring 1986: 5; Rowe 1995: 146; Sarris 1998: 98).

Scholarship on more recent rom-com is sparser but no less suggestive of variety. I will adumbrate more fully recent cyclical developments postulated for the genre in the following chapter, which discusses the influence of contemporary notions of love on the genre in France and worldwide. For now, though, it is important to look in greater depth at two key features of discourse circulating around the genre: the lack of critical consensus over its definition and its typical status as an object worthy of cultural suspicion and scorn.

While my introduction emphasised the importance of the possibility of relative equality across the two genders in the rom-com's structural focus, some scholars writing from feminist and other perspectives about cinematic romance in general (as in literary studies) have by contrast focused on the happy ending of the Hollywood romance as more or less forcing conservative ideologies upon its viewers (Fischer 1989: 243; Neale and Krutnik 1990: 145). While this overstatement was most common in the wake of 1970s Post-Structuralist-influenced theory, it has subsequently been seriously challenged through the expansion of cultural studies in the 1990s and the move to return agency, historical contingency and social identity to the film viewer. I have already suggested that intimation of cinema's power to *potentially* influence viewers has far from vanished from film studies (and rightly so). The fact that the happy ending is still commonly associated with rom-coms – classical definitions of comedy, after all, hinge upon this structural feature – has

allowed negative attitudes to persist; for instance, Rollet's article on the French rom-com sees the global format in terms of a generic narrative structure based on obstacles to overcoming supposedly inevitable union, to which she attributes an 'implicitly reactionary ideology' (2008: 94). Yet not only has work in film studies emulated the move elsewhere to interrogate romance for the pleasures it can offer female audiences (Stacey 1990) (as Rollet acknowledges [2008: 96]); Rowe (1995: 8) has defended the rom-com in spite of its default ending, drawing on Mulvey's (1985) essay 'Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience', in which (revising earlier statements) she suggests that the importance of narrative's potential lies not in its final resolution but in the upheaval that precedes this. There is evidence this may be particularly true for comedies, given the fact that these films are almost always sold on their humorous moments, as opposed to story elements (King 2002: 87). Similarly, many films of the genre acquire a cult status that involves repeated viewing and a focus not so much on the ending as on particular sequences. Also relevant to this debate are arguments that have challenged a historical tendency to see gags (often viewed as inherently subversive) and narrative (usually held up as conservative in the case of post-Aristophenean New Comedy including rom-com) as diametrically opposed or even functioning independently (Gunning 1986; Palmer 1987: 144). In any case, Chapter 2 will argue that the centrality of the happy ending to romantic comedy has been exaggerated and – along with Chapter 4 – that it is certainly of limited usefulness for the contemporary French genre.

Returning to the question of how to conceive rom-com beyond politics, most incisive is Deleyto's 2009 *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, in which he argues for a re-envisioning of genre as a whole and rom-com in particular in terms not, as

traditionally, of belonging, but of participation. Borrowing from a wide range of sources including George Lakoff's cognitive theory of categories, chaos theory and most importantly Jacques Derrida's theory of genre, Deleyto argues convincingly for an approach to genre that is both more ambiguous and more pervasive than those traditionally taken in film studies. In his model, all texts can be seen to participate in one or several genres, without these generic affiliations providing the limits of their definition (Deleyto 2009: 1-17).

Deleyto is equally eloquent on the importance of this wide-ranging approach for analysing rom-com. As he notes, of all genres this one is frequently held up as the most trivial and crassly commercial: he cites a recent *Sight and Sound* review referring to 'a conviction-free romantic comedy aimed at the teen market' (ibid: 2), while a definition of romantic comedy as 'the most vile, insipid, sanity-destroyingly horrible genre in the history of cinema' thrown up by an Internet search on the urbandictionary.com site is equally typical and even more vitriolic. This definition goes on to illustrate the misogynistic association between women and strands of popular culture viewed as execrable, by suggesting that '[the rom-com] exists solely for the entertainment of obnoxious, highly sentimental housewives who feel that their gender must consign them to this terrible fate'.⁵ More relevant to Deleyto's argument, though, is its citation of consistency of formula as one of the negative features of rom-com, perfectly exemplifying the contention that 'boundary patrolling' by the critical institution preserves the genre's purity in superficiality. That is, rom-com has suffered particularly from the 'aesthetic determinism' characterising too much genre criticism and reinforcing the still potent negative

⁵ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=romantic%20comedy&defid=1995126>. Accessed 20 July 2012.

association between genre and popular culture. Victim of a circular argument, it is seen to be typified only by those highly conventional films including the most conservative perspectives and therefore it is designated the most conventional and conservative genre. Looking beyond rigid classification, Deleyto argues, not only proves useful in analysing elements found in all sorts of unexpected places, from canonical films of other genres to independent cinema, usually considered to be broadly outside genre; it is often in these areas that the most interesting innovations push the genre in new directions (ibid: 2-3). Taking this broad sweep into consideration, he finally concludes:

The genre of rom-com can [...] be seen as the intersection of three, closely interrelated elements: a narrative that articulates historically and culturally specific views of love, desire, sexuality and gender relationships; a space of transformation and fantasy which influences the narrative articulation of those discourses; and humour as the specific perspective from which the fictional characters, their relationships and the spectator's response to them are constructed as embodiments of those discourses (ibid: 45-6).

Deleyto goes on in the same passage to explain that the breadth of this definition illustrates why so many films use rom-com conventions, without necessarily being primarily identifiable with the genre, and that even the absence of one of these features in some cases does not invalidate the appropriateness of the paradigm.

In stressing generic hybridity, within film studies Deleyto's approach is comparable to the new genre criticism of writers including Richard Maltby and also – as he recognises (ibid: 5-6) – Neale and especially Rick Altman. Such models complement his own by focusing on the functioning of various genres within one

film. In this light, references to rom-com as a marketing device do not muddy the waters of generic identity but generally provide a useful indication that a film is likely to participate in the genre, even if only in a minor way. At the same time, Deleyto also goes beyond these theorists' work in seeing genre as *primarily* an analytical tool. Providing a kind of limit case for genre itself, this paradigm might appear to beg the question of the appropriateness of delimiting the corpus examined here in generic terms at all, given the wide sweep of texts I will be referencing. It is true that the choice of films discussed in this thesis – along with the wider rom-com filmography of the period provided – while not arbitrary, proceeds from a number of informed choices and does not claim to be an exhaustive enumeration of French films of the period that use rom-com conventions. The filmography, instead, lists those films of the period under analysis in relation to which the rom-com analytical toolbox can most obviously prove useful. Genre here acts as a kind of net in which to gather films with comparable features for practical purpose – as Neale [1995: 167] has observed, genre writing, like all scholarly analysis, must be selective. However, the generic net is wide-meshed: porous and open, with contents subject to change.

ROMANTIC COMEDY IN FRANCE

Romantic Comedy in French Film Studies

I. The historical absence of (romantic) comedy

In France, not only is there no branch of film studies equivalent to the originally Anglo-American category of genre studies, but romantic comedy specifically has been seen as simply nonexistent in national filmmaking until very recently. Yet, given the broad understanding of rom-com offered in this chapter, one could in fact argue for approaching many pre-1990 French films from the perspective of the

genre. Salient candidates might include the Belle Époque films of the late 1940s and the 1950s directed by Jacqueline Audry and others, usually considered costume dramas in the *tradition de qualité*, whose critical neglect has been signalled by Geneviève Sellier (2005) and more recently Hayward (2010); some New Wave films, especially those less well-known like *Les Jeux de l'amour/The Games of Love* (Philippe de Broca, 1960) and *Ce soir ou jamais/Tonight or Never* (Michel Deville, 1961), also analysed by Sellier (2010), from the classic rom-com perspective of their negotiation of anxiety about female emancipation; and a number of other films from the 1960s to the 1990s by, in addition to de Broca and Deville, such directors as Jean-Paul Rappeneau and Jacques Demy (which also include action-adventure/crime caper or, in the case of Demy, musical elements).⁶

Such scholarly lacunae are inseparable from the snobbery around genre in general and comedy in particular that exists in many French cinephilic institutions. A representative attitude towards genre is exhibited by prominent and prolific scholar René Prédal (1993: 54) when he writes: 'French cinema does not rely on genres [...] because it has always taken another direction, what we call the "psychological film" until the 1950s, and then 'auteur cinema' since the New Wave'. Regarding the 'psychological' tradition, although Prédal associates this primarily with pre-New Wave cinema, allegiance to the closely related concept of realism is still a defining characteristic of much French cinema (cf. Hayward 2005: 98). As such, its perceived opposition to genre cinema is worthy of attention. The suggestion is that if genres rely on formulae, they are less likely to depict psychologically complex, or realistic, characters – and this is particularly applicable to comedy, given the prevalence of

⁶ Moine has noted that certain films of the late 1960s and early 1970s by Deville, de Broca, Rappeneau and others were known as '*comédies à la française*' to denote their similarity to American screwball films (2005: 218).

exaggeration and stereotype as key traits in the genre.⁷ In other words, the opposition of genre and realism ('psychological' or other) informs French hostility towards genre – especially more overtly 'formulaic', or formally cohesive, genres such as comedy and rom-com. Yet the status of filmic realism as itself reliant on formal and other conventions is now a familiar notion in global film studies (see Hallam and Marshment 2000: 97-121). In any case, stylisation and blatant contrivance have already been shown to be exceptionally poor indicators of fictional texts' interrelation with and bearing on the external world.

Regarding the supposed opposition of auteur and genre cinema, this is rooted in the association of the former – certainly the variant of it championed by the French New Wave – with an idiosyncratic vision of the world, generally explored through narrative and/or stylistic experimentation. It is easy to see how this clashes with the appeal to familiarity on which narrower conceptions of genre rest – despite the centrality of genre filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock in elegiac New Wave writings about Hollywood. Moine (2002: 7) further constellates the rejection of genre with a general Gallic tendency to divorce films from their context. Indeed social relevance, especially gendered, is a facet routinely neglected by aesthetically-oriented work even on relatively popular auteurs like Demy, François Truffaut or Éric Rohmer. In the auteurist framework, film exists as art removed from human life, available to theory but outside history. Romantic comedy is likely to suffer at the hands of critics bent on abstraction, notwithstanding the potentially more 'universal' elements of romantic discourse, because of its simultaneous appeal to specific cultural knowledge.

⁷ See for example Moine (2010: 41).

By contrast, a relative wealth of scholarship exists on early and silent film comedy, thanks to its putative role in establishing the basic codes of cinema. For example, in a rare recent publication dedicated to film comedy, *Cinéma: le genre comique* (Rolot and Ramirez 1997, published by Montpellier University following a conference on the subject held in May 1996), of the ten papers included, four deal with the first decades of cinema. This is in line with a global tendency in film studies over the last few decades to re-examine long-neglected early films, and at the same time resonates with French structural-linguistic scholarship on cinema, paradigmatically in the work of Christian Metz.

On the other hand, the *bête noire* of a central branch of the Academy has for many decades been filmed theatre, which became central to French popular cinema with the advent of sound. Hence, for example, in 1966, 12 years after Truffaut's (1976 [1954]) famous attack on the *tradition de qualité* that was the inheritor of the theatrical tradition, Robert Desnos writes:

From its invention, cinema knew perfection in the comic genre. *L'Arroseur arrosé*, *Boireau épicier* (Lumières' 'The Sprinkler Sprinkled,' or 'Watering the Garden,' and 'Boireau the Grocer') are already perfect films. It took the intervention of the pathetic Max Linder and Rigadin to rob cinema of all interest in France; the ridiculous rules of the theatre then replaced spontaneous fantasy. (Desnos 1966: 119, quoted in English in Gordon 2001: 71; sic)

The result of such attitudes has been the neglect of a huge corpus of French films of the classical period, with the historical under-privileging of language, including linguistic comedy, as its by-product. Verbosity in this strand of French filmmaking is

linked to a strong national literary tradition, with adaptations such as the film versions of plays from the *théâtre de boulevard* generally constructed around elaborate scripts and dialogue. Prejudice against linguistic analysis is relevant to romantic comedy, as a notoriously ‘wordy’ genre. In fact, the association of French cinema in general with highly worked dialogue, reflected by the frequently separate role and accreditation of *dialoguistes* from screenwriters, may have predisposed the national cinema to embrace rom-com. It is still certainly the case that films which exploit refined dialogue attract censure from critics associating them with the tradition of quality, as with the controversy surrounding the success of the theatrical import ensemble rom-com *Le Goût des autres/The Taste of Others* (Agnès Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri, 2000) (see Leahy 2007).

While auteurism has historically provided one critical model through which to analyse otherwise ‘uninteresting’ comedies like these – with figures like Guitry attracting at least some attention, albeit not primarily from a socio-historical standpoint – the same cannot, however, be said of stardom. Rigadin and also Raimu are prominent examples of stars from the boulevard tradition who are all but absent from academic work. Elsewhere, Fernandel and later Louis de Funès represent two major figures, around whom entire series of films were constructed, who have received very little critical attention. Hence Vincendeau notes that North American scholar Richard Kuisel (2000) presents Fernandel’s enormous popularity, adduced as a major factor in 1950s French cinema’s greater success at home than in America, as something of a discovery (Vincendeau 2011: 344). Female stars are even less likely to come under scrutiny in their (in any case historically uncommon) appearances in comic roles. For example, as Vincendeau (2009: 212; 234) has noted, comedienne Anne Girardot has only attracted real critical attention within France as one of the

actors featuring – in a rare dramatic role – in venerated auteur piece *Rocco and His Brothers* (Luchino Visconti, Italy/France 1960). Performative aspects of comedy and the role of stars within it are generally ignored – partly because of their extratextual, social reach. Even less often references than language itself is delivery, such as the pleasures associated with Guitry's quick-fire badinage or Fernandel's thick southern accent. A significant exception is represented by the work of Vincendeau on the importance of the southern accent in the classical cinema (2005), featuring in a French collection on actors.⁸ Indeed, Vincendeau's work on the importance of traditions of performance to French cinema, such as via actors originating in the theatre or music hall (Vincendeau 2000b: 5-10; 2004), makes such omissions elsewhere all the more striking – as does the way in which US and to a lesser extent British scholarship has underlined the particular importance of performers in these countries' national film comedies. Vincendeau has also written on de Funès in a work dedicated to *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (2000b: 136-57), the French edition of the same collection includes a section on Girardot encompassing her popular roles (2009: 212-39). A long French-language essay on Fernandel by her (2012) has also recently appeared in a study of French actors and genres between the years 1930 and 1960, co-edited by Gwénaëlle Le Gras. Le Gras represents one of the few other contemporary French scholars whose work does encompass stardom (see also Le Gras 2010a and b).⁹ It is worth noting that most of these star-oriented works in comic genres, like those produced outside France, have essentially focused on comedian comedy, whose narrative structure can to some extent be contrasted with the more dyadic (or triadic) focus of romantic comedy. However, many rom-coms

⁸ A recent conference paper on Fernandel also scrutinised issues of language and delivery (Pillard 2011).

⁹ A rare earlier French work to examine popular actors is André Sallée (1988).

include star turns and intersperse a more presentational aesthetic within a broadly narrative-based mode. In line with a strong tradition of comedian comedy in France (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 117-9), popular comedians' and performers' major contribution to the French genre will be a feature of this thesis.

Nor is bias against comedy limited to academics in France. For instance, the genre is frequently excluded from prestigious film awards like the Palme d'Or and the Césars. One particularly striking omission concerns the fate of 2008 smash hit comedy *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*. Despite attaining the record for the highest grossing French film ever in France, the film was almost absent from the Césars (and certainly from the even more unapologetically art cinema-oriented Cannes awards). In rom-com, it is more often those films positioned at the auteurist end of the spectrum, usually involving some stylistic experimentation – and often more consonant with a realist or melodramatic mode than with comedy – that achieve greater recognition. Exemplary are the Césars won by bitter-sweet, naturalistic ensemble piece *Vénus Beauté (Institut)* (see pages 127-33) (Best Film, Best Director, Best Writing and Most Promising Actress for Audrey Tautou) or understated but intermittently visually surreal romance *Quand la mer monte/When the Sea Rises* (Yolande Moreau and Gilles Porte, 2004) (see pages 103-4; 159-60) (Best Actress for Moreau). Such prejudice is further replicated transnationally through distribution: even at London's *Institut Français*, whose film library is used primarily by Gallic expatriates for home entertainment, auteur films are much more likely to be stocked than truly popular fare, with the possible exception of top box office smashes.

One reason for this suspicion of mass entertainment at both academic and broader cultural levels may be linked to what Jean-Luc Denat and Pierre Guingamp (1993: 67-8), in an article about 'commercial cinema', have described as French

people's complex relationship with money. Certain films' unapologetic interest in mass appeal certainly appears to lie behind some studies' under-privileging of popular cinema in its totality. Thus a more recent study by Prédal on post-2000 French filmmaking calls for cinema to eschew the use of clichés and accuses mainstream comedy of, in the best case (*Amélie*, *Les Choristes/The Chorus* [Christophe Barratier, 2004]), lacking artistic ambition, and in the worst (the films of James Huth and, latterly, Patrice Leconte), of shameless commercialism and 'appealing only to idiocy, laziness, bad taste and people's most mediocre leanings' (2008a: 13).

As Darren Waldron and Isabelle Vanderschelden (2007: 8) have noted, such negative attitudes towards popular cinema have only been exacerbated in recent years by a French critical tendency among cinephilic critics – such as Jean-Michel Frodon in articles in *Cahiers du cinéma* from 2005 onwards – to equate so-called commercial filmmaking with 'a multifaceted crisis' linked to inflated production costs and shorter cinema runs. The spectre of Hollywood looms large behind this negative perception of what has been dubbed the multiplex culture. France and the US famously have a long history of cultural and trade disputes centred on the cinema. While French perceptions of Americana and specifically Hollywood, themselves far from univocal, have shifted between positive and negative poles over many decades, there has been an intensification of hostility towards commercial US cinema since around 1980. Pascal Ory (1989) has shown how post-war Franco-centrism developed in the 1980s into cultural-centrism. Lucy Mazdon (2000: 6-8) has moreover charted the way in which a French tendency since World War II to use the US as a foil against which to define itself led, through the issue of culture, to a mobilisation of anti-American discourses, in particular around the 1993 GATT trade

agreements, in which cinema featured prominently. While I examine Franco-American relations through rom-com more fully in chapter 5, for now it is interesting to note that a major feature of these debates was the differing French and US concepts of cinema as artwork or as commodity, respectively. Denat and Guingamp (1993: 67) make no mistake when they observe that for some French people, US cinema has been suspect, too, from a moral point of view.

At the same time, conversely, as Moine (2002: 27) has also noted, the elevation of comedy from other countries is another not uncommon discourse (see for example Audé 1989). Rom-com directors including Ernst Lubitsch and Howard Hawks were prominent among those Hollywood genre filmmakers venerated by the *politique des auteurs* and, as we shall see in Chapter 5, US rom-coms are still sometimes championed by the French press where domestic ones are not. This situation appears illogical in a context where the possibility of defining French cinema against Hollywood in any sense is complicated by the fact, noted by Moine, that:

The practice of combining generic features drawn from a national cultural tradition with a form, references and generic paradigms that are at least perceived as belonging to a globalised neo-Hollywood model, constitutes one of the defining tendencies of contemporary French popular cinema. (2007a: 36)

King has further pointed out that the global dominance, since the Great War, of Hollywood *comedy* in particular makes it difficult to pinpoint distinctly national dimensions, ‘so strongly has the Hollywood version become associated with the fundamentals of the form’ (2002: 164). This is also true of rom-com, which has been

perceived as quintessentially American, thanks partially (as I will argue more fully in defining the corpus towards the end of this chapter) to the US' place at the forefront of the move towards gender equality.

Another major perceived threat to indigenous cinematic quality via popular output is television. Prédal is yet again exemplary, asserting that the small screen is 'contaminating' and 'sucking the lifeblood' from a cinema already beleaguered by 'the hegemony of US production' (2008a: 36; see also Sorlin 2005). And once again such prejudices are likely to apply in great measure to (romantic) comedy, since a high proportion of not only artists but also filmmakers have moved into this genre from the arena of television in France in recent decades. Indeed, Rollet (2010) has underlined the number of first-time rom-com directors coming from television. These are often women, including such commercially successful figures as Valérie Guignabodet (*Mariages!*, 2 million tickets sold), Isabelle Mergault (*Je vous trouve très beau*, 3.4 million) and Lisa Azuelos (*LOL [Laughing Out Loud]*, 3.6 million).

The latter observation reflects the fact that many of the same cultural biases rampant in the context of global discourse around rom-com apply in French film studies. The fact that women often come to popular filmmaking in France through television speaks to their exclusion from high French cinephilic culture (cf. Vincendeau 1987: 9), adding specific appeal to popular genres for them. More generally, the same tendency to view comedy as either ideologically retrograde or neutral and 'socially irrelevant' (Vincendeau 1996: 88) has been rife in France (see for example Jeancolas 1979, Douin 1974: 30; 32). To cite just one more recent example, Martine Danan (1998: 282) looks to a literary precedent in invoking Brecht's suggestion that narrative catharsis precludes critical distance. Therefore, she

argues, comedy puts social problems into perspective and encourages acceptance of the status quo.

All these factors help explain both rom-com and indeed comedy's broad absence from French academic enquiry, including those studies purporting to be broad in their range. Unsurprisingly, Prédal's various and in some cases ostensibly encyclopaedic works on the post-World War II cinema show little interest in comedy and are in fact increasingly littered with dismissive references to the genre (see also Prédal 1984; 1991; 2008b). If less explicitly critical of comedy, a tome by respected scholar and *Cahiers* critic Frodon, *L'Âge moderne du cinéma français* (1995), dedicates only three out of 858 pages to a handful of comedies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as two very brief subsections to the work of Bertrand Blier (the second of which notably privileges *Merci la vie* [1991], amongst the director's few non-comic works). Similarly, Claude-Marie Trémois' (1997) auteurist analysis of filmmaking in the 1990s adopts an unashamedly elitist tone and includes only Cédric Klapisch and early Tonie Marshall, both high comedy-drama directors, in her list of favoured filmmakers. Martine Beugnet's (2000) study of the portrayal of cultural difference in recent French cinema includes no comedies or rom-coms at all, although several pertinent examples exist (see Chapter 2).

The final nail in the coffin for any specifically French history of romantic comedy studies has been the absence of cultural and gender studies as distinct disciplines in French academic institutions. While I have suggested that it is within this framework that many analyses of the genre have emerged in Anglophone contexts, no equivalent has existed in France until very recently – despite the key contributions of France-based scholars like Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray to theories of femininity especially. This bespeaks conservative

attitudes towards gender, explaining the absence of references not only to rom-com but also to romance itself even in books dealing specifically with genre in a French context (see Rollet 2008: 93). In the past two decades, however, gradual changes have slowly begun to emerge in French scholarship.

II. Romance and comedy in contemporary scholarship

Moine's pioneering contribution to contemporary global and French genre studies is undoubtedly the most significant body of French scholarship relevant to this study – alongside, less directly, Sellier's cultural studies approaches to French cinema of earlier decades. Accordingly, Moine's research provides a frequent reference point for this thesis, albeit most often indirectly (rather than through studies of contemporary rom-coms per se). In addition to her research on remakes, Moine has published two book-length analyses of French genres (2002; 2005a), the latter as editor. With respect to the opening up of scholarly work in relation to popular local genres, also worthy of a mention is a major collaborative research project launched in 2011 headed by Sellier, entitled 'Cinépop 50', which gathers a number of scholars (including Moine and Le Gras) to examine popular French cinema of the 1950s and the attendant phenomenon of popular cinephilia over that period. More significantly for our purposes, Moine and Sellier are also the co-organisers of an ongoing seminar series entitled 'Genre et Gender' on behalf of Université Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle and one publication (so far) has come out of this (Moine and Sellier 2012), further attesting to a slow shift towards recognising the importance of not only genre studies but – and in relation to them – gender studies in France.

The extreme hesitancy of the move towards accepting that genre may prove helpful in approaching film is amply evidenced by the fact that, within Moine's own

collection *Le Cinéma français face aux genres* (roughly, *French Cinema Confronts Genre*), the title of eminent scholar Pierre Sorlin's (2005) opening essay asks – against the drift of the rest of the book, as he acknowledges – whether French film has 'avoided falling into the genre trap' and suggests the national cinema's resilience in the face of the challenge of television may be thanks to the absence of indigenous genres. All the same, Moine's extended studies are highly significant in eroding longstanding boundaries – notably the opposition of auteur and popular cinema itself, as problematised by her own (2005b) essay in the same collection examining the emergence of the label *comédie d'auteur*, or auteur comedy, in the national press in the early 1990s. Such iconoclastic, cultural studies-informed approaches are also in evidence in the work of French scholars who write in both French and English, including, in addition to Rollet, Vanderschelden and Vincendeau. All these scholars' contributions to critical thought are helping to bridge the chasm that has, over the years, separated some aspects of French and Anglophone critical thought.

French Romantic Comedy in Anglophone Film Studies

I. *Biases and barriers*

Despite the large body of Anglophone work on French cinema, it is still the case that here too a very small proportion has focused on rom-coms or even comedies. It is noteworthy that, on the whole, even those collections that would appear more likely to include comedy eschew its analysis. For example, O'Shaughnessy's (2007) study of French political cinema, despite recognising political cinema's increased focus on personal and familial scenarios (ibid: 3), proceeds under the banner of *commitment*, and thus includes only one film that could possibly be described as a comedy – but not as a rom-com – *Fred* (Pierre Jolivet, 1997). And Hayward (2005: 304) argues

that even Phil Powrie (1999a: 2), whose contribution to re-envisioning popular French cinema as a revealing socio-historical document is impressive, over-privileges as the nation's 'hegemonic' cinema in the 1990s the heritage film, to the detriment of comedy, when box office figures indicate otherwise. Comedies, be they farcical (*Les Visiteurs* [Jean-Marie Poiré, 1993]) or more sedate, with romantic elements to the fore (*Romuald et Juliette, Chacun cherche son chat/When the Cat's Away* [Cédric Klapisch, 1996]), represent only four out of at least 23 films discussed in some depth in his edited collection on French cinema of the decade (Powrie 1999b).

Although rom-com is generally seen to travel better than 'straight' comedy, contextual (not to mention linguistic) specificity is still likely to inhibit its analysis from abroad. In a different context, it is to cultural opacity that Jenny Lau attributes a Western tendency to ignore the comic dimension of Hong Kong cinema in favour of the martial arts tradition, pointing out that 'the analysis of comedy is an exceptionally difficult task because the recognition of humour depends heavily upon understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the interaction of the symbolic, such as gestures and icons, linguistics and so on, which are defined by their own social and cultural tradition' (quoted in King 2002: 156). While the cultural gap between Anglo-American and French cultures may not be so large as between Western and Eastern ones, Lau's description bears comparison with the Anglophone reception of French cinema, helping to explain the latter's 'arty' image (cf. Selfe 2010: 162). Despite recent rom-com exports, the local referentiality of stars and narrative situations remains a barrier to popular cinema's international exhibition. This means that external scholars are less likely both to be aware of French comedy than other components of the national cinema, and in most cases also to fully

understand its resonance. Add to this global prejudices against rom-com, and the paucity of Anglophone scholarship on the French genre comes as no real surprise.

II. Adjacent scholarship

In indirectly relevant work, early French comedy has attracted some attention from abroad, no doubt thanks principally to its foundational status. Not only was comedy the behemoth of the national cinema from its inception, but thanks to the influence of national comedy on US filmmaking, France can be seen as the major progenitor of global screen comedy. This historical perspective only adds to the difficulties of unravelling ‘national’ dimensions of comedy from influential Hollywood models, the latter being themselves partially calqued on Gallic predecessors, as illustrated by the work of Abel (1988; 1995; 1999). However, while these discussions do attempt to link aesthetics with the culture in which texts were produced, they accord little focus to the significance of the romance narratives that were the bread and butter of much early film. This is also true of Rae Beth Gordon’s (2001) study of the importance of body comedy historically in France.

More recently, the French grotesque tradition has continued to distract attention from the gendered aspects of humorous film narratives, as in the frequent linkage between that tradition and the male buddy duos which are prevalent in national comedy (see for example Forbes 1992: 177-84; Harris 1997). Such a focus tends to ignore buddy films’ typically sexist portrayal of female characters, who are objectified almost as a rule. It does, though, incorporate a degree of interest in the importance of stardom to comedy: a theme of this thesis. This was picked up in the 2000s by Isabelle Vanderschelden (2005), examining *beur* actors’ increased opportunities for substantial success in the genre. This thesis will show that the same

trend is visible in rom-com, with example cases including Moroccan-born Gad Elmaleh and to a lesser extent the half-Algerian Dany Boon, who – along with Gallic rom-coms stars like Alain Chabat and Édouard Baer – are among the highest paid French actors. The fact that all these actors are also stand-up comics illustrates my earlier suggestion that the opposition between comedian and romantic comedy is very far from absolute.

Equally attuned to representational politics – this time more gendered – in films including those they treat as rom-coms, are Carrie Tarr and Rollet (2001: 174-9) in their study of French women's filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s. Although this analysis to some extent reproduces, by categorising films as either auteur or genre cinema, the high-low distinction that my own work attempts to avoid, it nonetheless includes a welcome focus on the gendered sociological relevance of popular films and is a particularly important reference point for my interrogation of the contemporary French genre's construction of gendered identities in Chapter 3. One feature of the approach to romantic comedy espoused by Tarr and Rollet is their recognition that the space the genre creates for women is particularly significant in light of comic theory's stress on the cultural power of joke-makers (ibid: 166-7). Of course, comedians' status is subject to considerable variation even within films clearly built around their performance, notably depending on their involvement in the screenwriting and directorial process, and the linked balance between their character's construction as either teller or butt of the joke, or between the combination 'identification and distanciation' (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 149) typically identifiable with comedy. But in general the accession to a position of relative (discursive) power of groups traditionally seen to be disenfranchised within patriarchy is a remarkable and positive development.

Studies by both Vincendeau (2000b)¹⁰ and Hayward (2004) – as well as a handful of individual articles or subsections on performers – continue to include a welcome stress on performance, including of the comic variety, contrasting with Gallic scholarship's general neglect of stardom. More recently, Hayward's analysis of the French costume drama (2010) also illustrates that the turn towards French genre studies is occurring on this side of the Channel as well. In a related tendency, another of these works' strengths is their emphasis on the importance of mainstream French cinema – in the first two publications, particularly comedy – for its role in constructions of nationhood, both historically and today. It is true that there is reason to believe comedy may be more closely bound up with discourses of nationhood than other genres. Many theorists of the comic have noted that one of the major ways in which social groups define themselves is through shared humour. This suggests why the issue of inherited comic forms may also be a particularly sensitive one in a nation with a great comic heritage, where the perception of national culture under threat is widespread. It is significant, too, that French culture is often seen as menaced specifically by the USA, the same nation from which the rom-com notionally hails. In this genre, nationalism is a clear candidate for the 'other less orthodox satisfactions' of identity for which Krutnik (2002: 142) and others have argued the genre can be an alibi. For all these reasons, the rom-com's significance for French identity, conceived either nationally or transnationally, is a master theme of this study brought into direct focus in its final chapter. One further reference point for such discussion is David I. Grossvogel's research into 'transformations of the couple in French and American films'. This purports to be a cogent interrogation of the how

¹⁰ This study was also cited in the context of French scholarship on stardom, since the work was published in different versions in both languages.

constructions of the couple must be understood in the aforementioned national contexts, with a putatively popular focus. Nevertheless, there is little evidence of or speculation about films actually shaping norms, Grossvogel's definition of rom-com itself as focused on surmountable crises at the expense of characters remains limiting and his avowed intention of privileging texts 'that have become classics of the genre [...] or, among the new ones, those generally considered to be superior to the run of the mill' (2005: 9; 31) contains more than a whiff of aesthetic elitism.

In addition to these works, studies of individual films inflected by substantial rom-com tropes sometimes feature in interdisciplinary collections dealing with French society (see for example Barnet and Welch 2007), in the British journal *Studies in French Cinema* and in those studies of French popular cinema that do exist (Mazdon 2001; Waldron and Vanderschelden 2007). These film studies publications suggest a positive shift towards popular French cinema in British scholarship, but with familiar caveats. Not only does *Studies in French Cinema* still exhibit an unapologetically auteurist bias, even the collections privileging popular film mentioned above simultaneously contribute to the marginalisation of mainstream French cinema by including several analyses of films that cannot be described as popular either in terms of viewing figures or of narrative structure or spectatorial address, such as *Y'aura t'il de la neige à Noël?/Will It Snow for Christmas?* (Sandrine Veysset, 1996) and *Il est plus facile pour un chameau.../It's Easier for a Camel...* (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, 2003).

The latter essay is a contribution by Tim Palmer (2007), in which he argues that Bruni Tedeschi's film should be understood under the rubric of contemporary French 'pop-art' cinema, a concept he further develops in his own overview of trends in Gallic filmmaking practice today (2010). This work contains some interesting

observations. For instance, Palmer emphasises the significance of the recent trend for ‘producer-centered, Hollywood-oriented genre filmmaking – most notably the rise of the twenty-first-century French blockbuster’ and the resultant spread of exportable films in ‘middle- to low-tier productions’ (although his statement that this is taking place ‘on a scale unparalleled in French cinema history’ ignores the mass export of French popular cinema in the 1950s especially [see Schwartz 2007]). He appears to celebrate this development, by including substantial analyses of the *Mesrine* and *OSS117* film series that exemplify the tendency, as well as citing a remark by Anne Jäckel that the conventional idea of French production as ossified, narrow, or traditionally nationalist is obsolete. On the other hand, the epithet ‘middle- to low-tier’ implies a value judgement of its own and the notion of pop-art appears a pretext for failing to examine truly mainstream, popular genres, in favour of the sophisticated, postmodern gangster-thriller and satirical comedy series mentioned, among other examples. In his long list of export-friendly genre films Palmer includes not a single rom-com, an omission that problematises his claim that comedies’ frequently piecemeal distribution abroad reflects excessive trade caution about the perceived insularity of ‘lowbrow’ French slapstick (Palmer 2010: 98; 117-20). Meanwhile, the only rom-com he himself analyses is Julie Lopes-Curval’s self-reflexive, stylised ensemble film *Toi et moi* (2006) and here prejudice against the genre undergirds the appraisal of the film: ‘On one level, *Toi et moi* works as a rather mournful, female-centered romantic comedy [...] Lopes Curval’s ambitions, however, lie here but also elsewhere’ (ibid: 193). Like many New Wave aficionados of Hollywood, then, Palmer finds interest in an in any case partial selection of genre films in spite of their generic status more than in genre qua genre: the very aspect that binds texts so directly to mass viewing expectations and therefore to the social.

No such gingerliness afflicts a North American publication dedicated to contemporary women's films ('chick flicks') that, alongside Rollet's (2008) essay (and my own subsequent publication on women's rom-com productions in the 2000s [Harrod 2012]), comes closest to acknowledging the new rom-com trend in France and Europe as a whole, in an essay by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (2008b) entitled 'Chic flicks: the new European romance'. This essay avoids the term rom-com and in fact focuses on distinctly dark potential exponents of the genre, including *Amélie* as well as non-French examples *The Princess and the Warrior* (Tom Tykwer, Germany 2001) and *Mostly Martha* (Sandra Nettelbeck, Germany/Austria/Switzerland/Italy 2001). However, rom-com is present in all but name in an analysis that argues such films may be contributing to the development of a new European form of romantic chick flick, by following the Anglo-American 'prescriptions' for such films. This study also provides a welcome global perspective on movements in European cinema and specifically the disintegration of the old perceived dichotomy between European art versus US commerce, due to the transnational influence of not only Hollywood but also American indie culture, as well as the mass-crossing of European 'talent' to North America and the surprisingly high volume of European films receiving wide US distribution (ibid: 176-7).

Interestingly, while for Ferriss and Young in their analysis of the new pan-European rise of romantic 'chic flicks' the pertinence of the Anglo-American paradigm resides in 'a far more sanguine view of love' than that of European forebears, 'with surprisingly feel-good endings', these scholars suggest the 'European' contribution discernible in their examples is the element of naturalism

(ibid).¹¹ Although naturalism is here defined largely in terms of a fatalistic sensibility, as opposed to a dominant style, this remark is surely open to question in the context of the self-consciously artificial fairy-tale narrative of *Amélie* alone. Such a linkage, however, overlaps with my earlier observation about the tendency to include dark themes alongside light-hearted ones in French rom-com. In acknowledging this trait, Ferriss and Young's analysis illustrates once more how a breadth of understanding need not preclude a perspective that is essentially generic.

CONCLUSION

Ferriss and Young's work exemplifies well how research on areas contiguous to the French rom-com can provide a way into thinking about the genre in the absence of any sustained scholarly consideration of it. While global rom-com studies offer the most immediate frame of reference for this study, recent developments in French film studies – notably the slow embrace of the concept of genre – have given rise to literature that serves to illuminate individual arguments. More generally, going forward in the study, research into French cultural life represents a further immediate context for individual chapters' areas of interest. This is an appropriate place to move into the first of these: the specific issue of romance's present day, postmodern cultural manifestations as they emerge in the French rom-com.

¹¹ Ferris and Young also argue here that yet other European films 'have begun to portray a[n even] more typically Anglo-American – if not precisely Hollywood-esque – view of romantic love'. A French example is *Le Battement d'ailes du papillon/Happenstance* (Laurent Firode, 2000).

CHAPTER 2

ROMANCE TODAY

In this chapter I attempt to place what is broadly understood by the notion of romantic love more fully in its contemporary French context, as it is manifested in and through romantic comedy. I begin in the first section by examining those influences on the genre that might be seen as exogenous, in other words aspects of social change that remain relatively separable from perceptions of love relationships for couples per se, but that nonetheless impact on them in various ways. Grouped together under the umbrella concept of today's 'cold climate', these include new living arrangements (and specifically the move away from community and family that has gathered pace, especially in urban conglomerations, since the industrial revolution), as well as the 'dehumanisation' of work in the post-Fordist era and the effects of new technologies on courting rituals. Secondly, such changes encompass the far-reaching effects of the so-called death of God, as well as the more recent rise of Allah, on attitudes towards coupling. In the latter half of the chapter I examine the French rom-com's interaction with changes that have been more fully internalised in ideas circulating around love and relationships themselves. Here the term 'post-romance' designates the complex nexus of discourses, both incorporating and transcending traditional romantic ideas, that inform contemporary notions of the couple and of intimate relations between its members.

LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE¹²

If, as proclaimed by Anna Gavalda's well-known 2004 novel and its César-winning 2007 film version, 'togetherness is everything' (*Ensemble c'est tout*), then postmodern life, with its increasingly fragmented social organisation, is teetering on the brink of the abyss. The re-imagining of space since modernity has been a major focus of academic enquiry over the last half century or so, attracting the scrutiny of such prominent writers as Marshall Berman, Fredric Jameson, Michel de Certeau, Jean Baudrillard, Marc Augé, Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja. Recent histories and theorisations of changes to the organisation of social space chart the way in which urban living's challenge to traditional community structures has accelerated in the last two decades, largely due to the technical revolution, an idea popularised by the metaphor of the global village. In conjunction with the changes such developments have wrought in the world of work, this spatial reconfiguration has meant that face-to-face physical encounters are ever rarer and anonymous communication has become normalised. The perceived resulting disintegration of interpersonal relationships has been a major focus of recent Western fiction as a whole, and notably in the strain of social realism prominent in French auteur cinema of the 1990s associated with such directors as Robert Guédiguian, Erick Zonca and Bruno Dumont. It is also worth noting that in an increasingly mobile world, romantic relationships have themselves gained considerable significance as a determinant of living arrangements, in contrast with parental and familial links.

As for the decline of religion in the West, while this predates the rise of urbanism, it is the combination of the two that has, arguably, left many human

¹² The title of this section is a quotation from George Orwell's satirical novel *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (2000 [1936]) - later borrowed by Nancy Mitford - in recognition of capitalism's status in underpinning the changes discussed here (like the society critiqued by Orwell).

beings consigned to solitude, adrift in a cold modern world. This has clear repercussions for the status of romance today, most obviously providing a compelling explanation for the discourse's increasing cultural prestige. Thus, in a French context, philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (1993: 316) describes the (post-)modern 'era of emptiness' in terms of 'individualism à la carte, hedonistic and psychological, elevating intimate fulfilment to the highest goal of existence'. The comforting presences of both God and community have, in other words, both been replaced by The One, placing huge stress on the love relationship to fill a gaping void. This is reflected, too, by legislation: in France, the 1999 PaCS (Pacte Civil de Solidarité) laws – a major milestone in the history of romantic unions in a Catholic country – ratify desire alone as a sufficient basis for a relationship (Holmes 2006: 115). Additionally, since the events of 9/11 mobilised the possibilities of the shrinking world to annihilative ends, there has been something of a resurgence of interest in religion, notably Islam, but secondarily, in response to this, perhaps also in Christianity (Wheatley 2013). Indirect though their relationship to cinematic romance may seem, these new developments too are making their mark in different ways on the French romantic comedy.

Post-industrial pairings

I. Solitude and the city

The loneliness of singlehood is a subtext of many contemporary rom-coms and French examples are no exception. In several cases, this is directly premised on fragmented urban lifestyles, as this section will illustrate. At the same time, urban solitude goes hand in hand with urban freedom and the rom-com also evidences recognition of the new opportunities for romance afforded by life in post-industrial

cities. The genre thus frequently envisions the metropolis as a playground of possibilities, typically peopled by what *Elle* magazine journalist Dorothée Werner (1996) has described as a perpetually infantilised twenty-something (and now perhaps also thirty-something) generation. Finally, while gendered identities receive fuller attention in my next chapter, it would be misleading to ignore the gendered aspect of films' perception of loneliness – in other words the fact it is women who are most frequently perceived as suffering most from the disintegration of interpersonal structures in post-industrial life, with some exceptions and nuances.

Hints of a discourse around the solitude of urban life begin to emerge in the rom-com in the second half of the 1990s. For example, one feature of the marginality of the heroes of buddy movie/rom-com *Les Apprentis* (Pierre Salvadori, 1995), discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, is their apparent lack of family and friends. Although an acquaintance at first lends them a flat, his goodwill later gives way to open hostility and they are thrown out. One caring ex-girlfriend is all the pair appears able to muster between them in the way of any kind of community concerned for their welfare, as they barely scrape an existence in an unforgiving Paris.

However, looming particularly large over this discussion is the release in 2001 of the internationally successful and iconic *Amélie*, whose role in catalysing rom-com's appropriation in France as a whole was suggested in my introduction. Since the vast majority of those rom-coms that deal most explicitly with the question of love's place in post-industrial urban lifestyles have been produced since the creation of *Amélie*, in the 2000s, Jeunet's film is an overarching point of reference for this analysis. On the face of it, *Amélie* is a romantic fairy-tale set in an imaginary Paris in which an unhappy female protagonist actively seeks out apparently blissful

fusion with an idealised love object. At the end, the couple are paired atop a scooter for a final sequence whose grainy home-video look, upbeat music and fast editing style encode ebullient happiness. The film has, however, simultaneously been correctly identified as ‘well anchored in its socio-historical and cinematic period, exploiting the same issues of loneliness and isolation found in recent French new social cinema’ (Scatton-Tessier: 197).¹³ This is most obvious in the narrator’s account of loner Amélie’s cold upbringing, which has left her inept at relating to others; it is the desire to overcome this alienation that propels her journey towards union with Nino (Mathieu Kassovitz) in the film. Formally, too, Jeunet’s use of crane shots as well as mirrors and glass ‘symbolically enhance[s] her isolation’ (Vanderschelden 2007: 49-50). At one level, the film is explicitly nostalgic for the Montmartre community it depicts as in decline: Amélie’s plots to change the lives of those around her represent a refusal to accept compartmentalised living of the kind graphically illustrated by shots of her and other inhabitants of her apartment building engaged in everyday activities, simultaneously but on their own. But in the end the under-developed central romance – Amélie and Nino have not exchanged a single spoken word when they fall onto her bed – is the only antidote its story can find to anomic solitude.

The romantic utopianism of the ending is not the only reason that reading *Amélie* as merely an endorsement of love as a bulwark against loneliness fails to satisfy. Such an interpretation is rooted in plot alone and ignores the vibrancy imparted to the narrative by Jeunet’s exuberant, digitally enhanced vision of Paris as a hyper-modern playground where poetic realism meets virtual reality. Aesthetically,

¹³ This anchoring escaped some of *Amélie*’s detractors in the cinephilic press (see for example Bonnaud 2001).

the film is an unrestrained celebration of the possibilities afforded by modern technologies. Moreover, in the narrative too, as also noted by Scatton-Tessier (2002), dynamic mobility is presented as the upside of the postmodern condition, as for example in the many fast-paced shots of Amélie traversing the city by Metro. The manic quality lent these sequences by their rapid editing may betray a desperate need for frenetic activity, or for distraction from the inner emptiness that threatens at moments of quietude; but they nonetheless invite a certain breathless pleasure for the spectator, who is transported to the four corners of Jeunet's colourful toy-town metropolis. Indeed, the viewer's relationship to the material here arguably becomes less analytical than experiential, in the manner of the theme park rides which feature in the film and as theorised by some scholars of digital cinema (Bukatman 1998; Balides 2004).

Amélie is one of several French rom-coms to make a virtue of the new experiences offered by increased mobility today. At least four films produced in the next few years, *Décalage horaire*, *Clara et moi/Clara and Me* (Arnaud Viard, 2004), *Où avais-je la tête?* (Nathalie Donnini, 2007) and *Je vais te manquer/You'll Miss Me* (Amanda Sthers, 2009) reflect the recent shift in patterns of human interaction by having a couple meet in what Marc Augé (1995) has dubbed *non-places*, or places of transience too insignificant to be regarded as places – in these films either airports or, in *Clara et moi*, the Metro. Even more than *Amélie*'s Nino, who, in accordance with that film's preservation of some degree of community, worked in a local DVD rental shop (albeit for porn), these pairings represent a postmodern twist on the traditional notion of the girl next door – the girl, if you like, in the next-door seat.

On the one hand, there is something celebratory in the new potential for cross-cultural dialogue theoretically afforded by the encounters which all these films

stage in liminal spaces of possibility – although, perhaps unsurprisingly for a genre whose relatively conservative identity politics are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, in all these examples the couple are both French, white and middle-class. Nonetheless, Augé cites Certeau's discussion of *spaces*, or busy public places, like those inhabited by the characters in these films, to suggest that to frequent such spaces is 'to be other, and go over to the other, in a place' (Augé 1995: 83). Leaving aside questions of class, race and even gender, the non-place in Augé's description is seen as a regression to the experience of infancy, the same fusional return psychoanalytic theory identifies as driving human desire for the other. This is reflected in romantic comedy's stress on the childish wonder of fantasy narratives – especially where characters' childlike aspects are emphasised, as in *Décalage horaire* and *Où avais-je la tête*, both of which are indebted to *Romuald et Juliette* in having an uptight businessman rediscover childish abandon through a bubbly and somewhat chaotic female character. However, alongside their partial disavowal of contemporary isolation through blissful fusion across the wide gulf separating strangers, these narratives also speak to the disadvantages of anonymous existences. Danièle Thompson has noted in interview that her playful use of a lost mobile phone to bring the central couple together in *Décalage* gestures towards the serious issue of the communication breakdown endemic in contemporary society (Baudin 2002). As also discussed in Chapter 5, this is further (mis-)communicated throughout the film by the central male protagonist Félix's verbal confusion, as he speaks in a turbulent Franglais that is the product of his cultural disorientation as a Frenchman living in the USA. The fact that his life as a global businessman has given Félix neuroses and panic attacks makes a self-evident point. In *Clara et moi* the couple's first interaction or 'meet cute' (see Mortimer 2010: 5-6) (a phrase that again picks up on the

regressive elements of romance) echoes Amélie and Nino's aphasia. Just as Montmartre's modern-day good fairy communicates with her love object through a trail of written messages, so Antoine, seeing beautiful stranger Clara opposite him on the train, opts to write a note requesting a date. Since the impossibility of expressing love through a language plagued by cliché is an increasingly explicit staple of rom-com (Krutnik 2002: 138-9), this neatly avoids the problem, emphasising instead the actors' faces, shot in endearing close-ups as shy smiles steal across them. This moment of emotional warmth stands out all the more – indeed it is commented on by several reviewers – for its contextualisation in a *mise-en-scène* whose chilly, grey-toned palette and naturalistic lighting, captured at times digitally through a hand-held camera, reinforces the social realist codification of the frequently drab Parisian setting. Similarly, the anchorage of events in the real world makes it still more surprising when, at their first date against the romantic backdrop of the Seine by night, in a daring act of generic contortionism, the couple burst into a romantic song complete with dancing. Even within the musical number, however, tonal disjunction is preserved, as the couple's thin voices, more Demy than George Cukor, accompany inexperienced, rather tentative dance steps.

These chinks in the romantic overlay, and the human frailty of Clara's wavering voice in particular, pave the way for a plot development which brings to the fore the dark side of today's cultural freedoms: Clara's diagnosis as HIV positive. Occurring suddenly and without foreshadowing, this development prompts *Clara et moi* to lurch for the remainder of its duration into a melodramatic register. Specifically, although Antoine decides after much soul-searching that his love for Clara transcends the material challenges posed by her affliction, in a shock ending diverging from the rom-com's typical levelling of difference, it is Clara who rejects

Antoine, saying she does not believe he will make her happy, presumably because of his initial failure to support her following her diagnosis. What is interesting is the suggestion that it is precisely those freedoms that have brought Antoine and Clara together – and indeed are celebrated through intimate bedroom sequences replete with aestheticised views of actress Julie Gayet's breasts – that finally prove the obstacle to their love.

In *Clara et moi*, then, today's anonymous urban encounter, emblematically figured as finding love in a non-place, functions ambivalently, as opening up new possibilities only at the cost of old ideals of chaste femininity. Such an interpretation is further borne out by a storyline that sees Antoine object to Clara moonlighting for a phone sex line, an occupation which she falls into by accident through an acquaintance and finds amusing. This conjunction of ideas constitutes an obvious point at which to return to, and address directly, the ways in which the fragmentation of post-industrial living is represented in gendered ways in the rom-com. Women's centrality in the romantic drama of solitude is reflected by the cultural currency in France of the notion of 'Bridget Jones syndrome' (Anon 2002b; Rollet 2010), while Érika Flahault (1999) has identified anti-feminist images of female solitude as frequent in the French media since the 1970s. In fact, *Clara et moi* is unusual in presenting a woman who, faced with a flagrant display of male egotism, opts to remain single. The fact that she is hosting a party when Antoine begs her to take him back suggests, refreshingly, that this may be a positive choice.

Amélie is more typical, in its insistence on the desolation of female singlehood in an urban environment. It is significant here that, although Nino appears equally alone, it is the female character who initiates a desperate pursuit of union. The film selected as my case study at the end of this chapter, *Vénus Beauté*

(*Institut*), I will argue, also ultimately preserves the stereotype of female desperation. In one scene, there is a particularly striking contrast between female and male attitudes towards coupling relations, when protagonist Angèle promises a stranger sex in order to have him listen to her relationship troubles. The humour of her interlocutor's diffident but increasingly evident impatience arises from the fact that audiences are assumed to take it as read that men have little need for the kind of emotional connection the female character is attempting to achieve.

Released one year after *Amélie* in 2002, two films that favour a feminine perspective on postmodern solitude are *Irène* (Ivan Calbérac, 2002) and *J'me sens pas belle* (Bernard Jeanjean). Filmed in a similarly pared down style to *Clara et moi*, *Irène* stars Cécile de France as the eponymous heroine, whose dissatisfaction at singlehood is portrayed as both social (she finds her parents' ongoing enquiries about her love-life upsetting) and sexual (she fantasises about naked men whom she hardly knows). Like Tautou – and to some extent Gayet of *Clara et moi*, with whom she shares prominent, gappy front teeth and a trademark boyish haircut – de France is physically childlike, as reflected by press that has described her 'eternal role of little bird fallen from the nest' (Morain 2006b). This is further underlined in this film by her character's marked clumsiness and her consistent framing alone and overwhelmed by expanses of empty space around her. It is noteworthy that Irène does not even mingle with crowds on the Metro but travels in the self-contained bubble of a car, observing the world at a distance through a pane of glass. This postmodern version of the *femme-enfant* is, then, less a question of titillation in the manner of a Bardot than a means to visually express the vulnerability of the human 'atom' uprooted from community structures in today's metropolis: what one observer of Tautou has described as a 'modern fragility' (Gili 2007: 28). As with the

female protagonist of *Au suivant!* (Jeanne Biras, 2005), Jo, Irène's solitude is only magnified by an expensive but soulless apartment, in a building where interaction with neighbours is limited to passing civilities. Her unhappiness and overt availability also belies a friend's indignant insistence, on the topic of parental pressure to marry, that families should realise that being single can be a choice – a comment which is echoed in frank reverse two years later by the female heroine (Marina Foïs) of *J'me sens pas belle* ('Being alone can be great – if it's a choice'). Foïs' hangdog manner as she sings this poignant line suggests that she means to convey that this is less often the case than feminists would have us believe. In this film, such a worldview is reinforced by the decision to film in a format that looks almost like CinemaScope (Carrière 2004), redolent of 1950s melodramas, and that manages to isolate the slender Foïs in the frame despite the single location setting of an apartment. The presence of such backward-looking ideology, while echoing widespread societal prejudice, also invites an authorial interpretation: it seems no accident that both these films are directed by men. This is especially so in *Irène's* case, given the stereotyped characterisation of the two colleagues/ friends who are foils to the central character, as a man-hater and a nymphomaniac respectively. As with Hitchcock (see Modleski 1988: 5), director Calbérac's sympathy for women and misogyny towards them fundamentally entail one another.

A final acknowledgement should be made that the films *Décalage horaire* and *Où avais-je la tête?*, already touched on, as well as *Un Divan à New York/A Couch in New York* (Chantal Akerman, USA 1996) – all by female directors – go some way towards reversing the paradigm described above, in stressing male dysfunction closely bound up with post-industrial life. In each case, while the difficulties faced by the corporate male protagonists in relating to others are the

major obstacle to romance, the female characters' abandon and 'unruliness' (see Rowe 1995) is emphasised. However, in Chapter 3 I will illustrate how even these more progressive visions of strong femininity remain plagued by ambivalences that may be read in terms of anxiety about the future of the couple in the wake of feminism and urban disintegration, and that suggest women's internalisation of misogynist discourses.

II. The 'machineness' of (post)modern relations

In this section I examine more directly how the French rom-com mediates the impact of technological developments (beyond transport networks) on romantic relationships. In the first instance, I examine the recurrence of secondary themes around job satisfaction relating to the technological age, tending – as so often – to fall into gendered patterns. Secondly, I analyse a trend for rom-coms featuring anonymous communication networks as a forum for courtship.

Without exception, all the films discussed so far in this chapter and several others to be discussed coincide in linking romance to discourses about work. Moore's discussion of the ambivalence to technology displayed by *Amélie* invokes the concept of *machineness*, which I have adopted as the titular theme of this section, to show that in several instances within the film 'mechanisation in work leads to mechanisation in relations' (2006: 15). Examples given include Collignon's father's habit, retained from his working days, of punching holes, nowadays in leaves; Dufayel's obsessive repainting of the same thing; and the moment when Amélie reads out the words of the writer Hippolito to a ticket collector (on the Metro again) hoping for an interpretation, and he stares blankly and asks for her ticket. The film illustrates in this way post-Marxist warnings about the alienating effects of

capitalism. As Charles Levin (1981: 12) puts it, summarising Jean Baudrillard, '[man] defines himself through his work – give him back some real work', and Amélie is no exception, introducing herself to Dufayel with the label of her job – a waitress.

Dufayel and Hippolito, by contrast, as painter and writer, represent the acme of professional nobility, the Arts. These activities occupy, however, a limited place reserved for the dilettante in hypermodernity: neither character appears professionally successful, given their excess of free time and humble lifestyles, or indeed fulfilled, since Dufayel is reduced to copying the Old Masters and Hippolito – whose obsolescence is also signalled by the classicism of his name – to a seemingly fruitless search for philosophical truth. The topos of the failing artist or craftsman recurs in most of the films alluded to so far in this chapter, including *Les Apprentis*, *Clara et moi*, *Ensemble, c'est tout/Hunting and Gathering* (Claude Berri, 2007) and *Décalage horaire*. Most directly concerned with the interrelation between romantic and professional identities, though, is *Mensonges et trahisons et plus si affinités/The Story of My Life* (Laurent Tirard, 2002), the first part of whose title (literally, *Lies and Betrayals*) refers to its male protagonist Raphaël's (Edouard Baer) job as a ghostwriter. A considerable proportion of the narrative is taken up with Raphaël's professional life, which is described as a failure and narrated with black humour, as when his work is slated by his publisher or when a footballer, whose biography he has been hired to write, tells Raphaël he finds his writing pretentious, but that he would prefer something in the style of Baudelaire! In secondary plots, too, one of Raphaël's best friends has explicitly 'sold out' by working for a large corporation, and later suffers a breakdown, while the other abandons a career in advertising for a more fulfilling one in photojournalism and, dying in an accident, is martyred to the

cause of truth. The indivisibility of romantic and professional satisfaction as interweaving aspects of the construction of the self is made explicit in *Mensonges* through Raphaël's remark that for him writing and women have always been closely linked. This comment highlights the intersections between romance and Romanticism. What the two discourses share is their emphasis on the individual and his or her imagination. It is therefore logical that one way in which to endow characters in broadly realistically depicted worlds with the extraordinariness that makes them classic rom-com protagonists is through giving them artistic aspirations. The subtext of Raphaël's words to his newborn son at the film's close, telling him his father is (now that he has published an original novel) a writer, is that he is not just anyone but *someone*: in publishing his own work he has in fact attained the status of a character in not one but two grand narratives.

Irène illustrates the problems for intimate relationships created by the *machineness* of contemporary work patterns from a different angle, inside the postmodern office. In this film, romantic and professional dissatisfaction are if anything even more closely bound together than in *Mensonges*. Following shots of our heroine glued to *Swan Lake* on television, heightening her infantilisation and feminisation, we learn from a conversation that she longed to be a ballet dancer. When this could not be, she decided – equally naively – to become a lawyer in order to correct the injustices in the world. In the event, though, she is a *juriste*, a kind of highly qualified legal notary, in a large and faceless corporate firm, where her work appears to consist of administrative and secretarial duties.

All these films make gendered assumptions about professionalism. Female professionalism is belittled, through a combination of female characters' consignment to relatively low status jobs and a suggestion that work alone cannot

fulfil women (cf. Negra 2004: 3), which is particularly germane for the concerns of romantic comedy. Thus Irène answers to a much older patriarchal boss, who at times berates her unfairly; and the seeming meaninglessness of her corporate job is later contrasted with the artistic background of the man with whom the film comes closest to coupling Irène (although the ending remains open), musician turned painter-decorator François. Equally, while romance allows the male characters in *Décalage*, *Clara et moi*, *Ensemble c'est tout* and *Mensonges* to access their creative potential, in the first two films lower-status jobs appear satisfactory for the female leads (a beautician and a train hostess respectively); *Ensemble* excludes the female character from the trajectory to professional satisfaction enjoyed by her two male counterparts; and in *Mensonges*, despite female protagonist Muriel's high-status position as an architect, the value of her success is undermined by the revelation of a previous suicide attempt following a break-up. Additionally, Muriel's perceived masculinisation through her job, underscored by images of her wearing a hard hat, appears to contribute to Raphaël's initial refusal to commit to her. Moreover, architecture still retains a lower status in a Romantic individualist schema than Raphaël's literary calling. In this example, faced with women's penetration of all professional spheres, the world of work itself is denigrated by negative comparison with artistic callings still by and large held up as male property, especially in male-authored films. Only auteur Pierre Jolivet's *Je Crois que je l'aime/Could This Be Love?* (2007) casts its female lead Elsa, played by the highly acclaimed Sandrine Bonnaire, as the professionally more interesting sculptress to Vincent Lindon's businessman Lucas, a distinction heightened by the latter 'uncultured' character's efforts to feign knowledge of sculpture. However, the plot hinges on Lucas' inability to put love before business, following a bad experience in which a previous

girlfriend turned out to be a spy for a rival firm. By contrast, Bonnaire's high-handed manner with him when she is engrossed in her work appears in the end merely playing hard to get. It is left, in fact, to female filmmaker Thompson to endow a female character with a desire for [creative] professional self-affirmation entirely outstripping romantic need in her most recent film *Le Code a changé/Change of Plans* (2009). Here Sarah (Emmanuèle Seigner) voluntarily separates from her oppressive husband and attains success as a writer – although even here her authorship of children's literature remains outside the male-dominated 'high' literary canon. This diminution of female characters in professional roles in the rom-com is perhaps unsurprising given the genre's potential role in preserving the couple against the challenges female professionalism has posed to it (see also Chapter 3).

Another detail shared by both *Irène* and *Mensonges* is their allocation of a role to anonymous communication networks in coupling. In *Mensonges* this is limited to a secondary romantic plot involving one of Raphaël's friends, who searches for love via the Internet. But it is extremely prominent in the first film, which provides an extensive exploration of online courtship. Early in the film, Irène's nascent relationship with a white-collar colleague, Luca, is accorded greater attention than her interaction with Bruno. As the clichés of gender pile up, Irène – combining technophobia and slyness – having taken a shine to Luca after seeing him at work but having no reason to speak to him, asks him for help with her computer. The beginnings of a relationship ensue; however, when Luca tells her he is being transferred to Tokyo, the couple are reduced to Internet communication. What follows is a wryly humorous comment on not just the meaninglessness but the dehumanising aspect of corporate life – and the technical revolution as a whole – which finds comedy where a film such as recent auteur polemic piece *La Question*

humaine/Heartbeat Detector (Nicolas Klotz, 2007) found dark drama. Irène and Luca decide to have Internet sex, using webcams, prompting some initial reluctance from her and a comical false start, when the screen freezes. More worryingly, though, hilarity turns to nervous laughter on the part of the viewer when the pair actually start to enjoy this new form of intercourse and, in a hollow parody of post-coital intimacy, are portrayed ‘side by side’ on her bed, but with Luca’s face on the computer screen [Figure 1]. As much as Michel Houellebecq’s well-known 1998 novel *Les Particules élémentaires*, this storyline presents an unsettling vision of a contemporary society demanding, in the titular words of Slavoj Žižek in an article inspired by Houellebecq’s narrative, ‘No Sex, Please! We’re Post-Human’ – and all the more so when it is revealed that Luca has lied about being in Tokyo because this is his preferred way of conducting his relationships.



Figure 1: Postmodern intimacy in *Irène*.

A number of other films reference internet dating of different varieties ambivalently.¹⁴ Two films from 2003, *Toutes les filles sont folles/All Girls Are Crazy*

¹⁴ The Internet also features in a more positive way prominently in adolescent social interaction within the school peer group in teenpic crossover rom-coms *Lol* (Lisa Azuelos 2008) and *Une semaine sur deux (et la moitié des vacances scolaires)* (Ivan Calbérac 2009), analysed in depth in Chapters 4 and, in the case of *Lol*, 5.

(Pascale Pouzadoux) and *Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches/Leave Your Hands on My Hips* (Chantal Lauby), as well as *Je Préfère qu'on reste amis* (2005), reference the new phenomenon in passing, all with a degree of suspicion. Failed dates in the latter two films imply that searching for a compatible partner by such means is a game with difficult odds. More salient for this discussion, though, is Josiane Balasko's controversial film *Cliente/A French Gigolo* (2008), starring Nathalie Baye as a seemingly well-adjusted, successful bourgeois businesswoman in her fifties, who hires male prostitutes to romance and seduce her. Of particular note is her voiceover reflection that she first stumbled on the escort website by accident, and was attracted by the profile of a man who shared her still beloved ex-husband's name. This detail softens the anonymity of the experience, and the recollection as a whole aligns it with the more acceptable practice of internet dating; however this in turn underlines the businesslike aspect of all these ways of finding a mate. Balasko's film makes no moral critique of prostitution, depicting a real fondness, attraction and respect between Irène and Marco; but nor is this relationship finally posited as satisfying all Irène's romantic desires, as Marco leaves her weeping to return to his wife.

A comparable trend for featuring not just internet but blind and/or speed dating also emerges in films of the 2000s, including *Mensonges et trahisons* (in the secondary romance), *Je préfère qu'on reste amis* (2005) and, in passing, *Célibataires* (Jean-Michel Verner) and *Prête-moi ta main*, both from 2006. Of course, the comic potential of the blind date has not gone unnoticed by the Hollywood rom-com either (recent examples feature in *Dan in Real Life* [Peter Hedges, USA 2007] and *He's Just Not That Into You* [Ken Kwapis, USA/Germany/Netherlands 2009]) and their presence can to an extent be seen as a

pretext for jokes. Thus a split-screen montage shows *Prête-moi*'s Luis opposite an unappealing selection of the friends with whom his sisters have tried to set him up, culminating in a man. In *Mensonges*, Raphaël's corporate friend Max's experience of speed-dating appears discomfiting in the extreme, as his interlocutors' conversation veers from the banal to the excessively intimate ('I like theatre but not fellatio'). Worse, his own repeated opening gambit of quoting his salary is a parody of the reduction of sexual relations to commodification effected in Houellebecq's novels. Later, though, following Max's nervous breakdown – after attacking a woman he met via speed dating – and then his subsequent re-sensitisation, Max discovers the 'true' worth of love as mutual appreciation and the familial values more traditionally endorsed by the rom-com genre, when he starts a family with an East Asian bride, having explicitly travelled to this part of the world with the purpose of helping a woman out of poverty. So *Mensonges*, too, for all its ambivalence about the realities of speed dating, in the end speaks of a slow move towards endorsement of highly contrived encounters as an increasingly legitimate means to find fulfilling love. This is also the case in *Je vous trouve très beau/You Are So Beautiful* (Isabelle Mergault, 2005), to be analysed in the next chapter.

The films discussed so far in this section can all be seen to explore the implications of the decline of traditional community and family, in turn linked to the rise of urban living and changes in work patterns. Despite the pleasures and convenience offered by city life, loneliness and professional dissatisfaction are structuring themes, most often but not exclusively for female characters. The absence of traditional communities also places greater emphasis on anonymous networks as a way to meet a life partner, a trend that is viewed ambivalently by the rom-com. In the examples

above a virtual community temporarily replaces – and generally provides a poor substitute for – a real one. In several romantic comedies, though, the family is more directly replaced by a physically present but loosely structured network of friends and colleagues. It is to this substantial group of films that I will now turn.

Coupling *choral*

I. Familial failings

While the decline of the family itself is the focus of Chapter 4 of this study, I would like in this section to take up an argument made by Powrie (2007) in a French context and María del Mar Azcona (2010: 6-7) in a global one: that an abundance of multi-protagonist films produced in the past 20 years responds in a reassuring manner to the *absence* of old-fashioned, close-knit networks. More specifically, Powrie sees the decline of the traditional family reflected in films that celebrate groups of associates (unrelated by blood) which he calls tribal or surrogate ‘families’. Such constellations of characters are strikingly visible in the rom-com. Moreover, it is significant that the failure of the family as a refuge or adequate support is frequently an explicit secondary theme of the contemporary French rom-com. As I argue more fully in Chapter 4, this is true to some extent across the board, even in dyadic rom-coms. In *Irène*, for example, when the heroine is at her lowest ebb, in tears over a romantic rift and utterly alone, her mother telephones only to ask about a missing piece of clothing. Nonetheless, families on the whole appear either more conspicuously absent or much more heavily critiqued in tribal, or community, ensemble films of the kind theorised by Powrie.

Family absence is emphasised in a film starring Guillaume Canet and another directed by the actor. In Berri’s *Ensemble c’est tout*, a miniature community grows

up in an apartment block. Franck (Canet) spends his weekends journeying by scooter to see his grandmother, apparently the only relative he is in contact with, in an old people's home. Later a utopian storyline sees her liberated, cared for by Franck and his neighbour, then flatmate, then lover, Camille (Tautou). The English title *Hunting and Gathering* gestures overtly to the trope of the tribe in the narrative. Rom-com elements also intermittently adorn a melodramatic backdrop in the top French film at the national box office in 2010, *Les Petits mouchoirs/Little White Lies* (Canet), wherein a group of friends (and in some cases their spouses and children) converge on a holiday house, while one of their number languishes in hospital in a coma. The way in which friends occupy a space traditionally reserved for family in the narrative is underlined by interpolated home video footage of the group – including the invalid Ludo – on former holidays. However, the fact that Ludo dies without having been visited by many of those closest to him, as they are busy enjoying sun and sea, is a locus for resentment and strife among the group, suggesting the limitations of friends as a substitute for family.

As in *Ensemble c'est tout*, it is a grandmother who stands in for the nuclear family in *Fauteuils d'orchestre/Orchestra Seats* (Danièle Thompson, 2006), which comments more directly on the pluses and minuses of family ties. This character provides a frame narrative through an opening voiceover in which she recounts a journey she made to Paris in her youth. The same journey is now being undertaken by her granddaughter Jessica, played again by Cécile de France, as another childlike woman who prefers Peach Melba to alcohol. The community whose membership Jessica covets is that of the Parisian Avenue Montaigne theatre. However, her lack of connections and means force her to embrace an existence on its margins, secretly sleeping in a hotel room reserved only for daytime use by a concert pianist.

Elsewhere in the film, familial strife is dramatised through a storyline focusing on Jessica's suitor Frédéric and his father Jacques, who engage in immature Oedipal rivalries over women. However, arguably the most coruscating vision of the patriarchal family is provided by gay rom-com *Pédale douce* (Gabriel Aghion, 1996) (see also Chapter 3), based principally around a cross-dressing bar-club secretly frequented by bourgeois businessmen. Here the critique resides in the throwaway detail that the bar's owner, Eva (Fanny Ardant), left home and has embraced an underground culture because her father raped her.

These ensemble narratives encapsulate the contradictions characteristic of romantic comedy today. By this I mean that they imagine social networks as an idealised replacement for the deficient family. However, their endings also endorse heterosexual coupling, the basic unit of the family structure. Thus *Ensemble c'est tout* closes on Camille's announcement that she wants to have Franck's baby; *Fauteuils*' Jessica is paired off with wealthy playboy Frédéric; and even Eva of *Pédale douce* produces a child with her conservative lover Alexandre. The notion of friends or acquaintances replacing family is thus ultimately limited in the rom-com.

II. *The mosaic film and the chance encounter*

All the films discussed so far have the groups they depict converge around a locale, be it an apartment building, a theatre or a bar – the latter example also featuring in Jaoui's hit ensemble rom-com *Le Goût des autres/Other People's Taste* (Agnès Jaoui, 2000). Margrit Tröhler has suggested that multi-protagonist films of this kind, involving characters who have some sort of connection antecedent to the events of the plot, and which she calls group (or ensemble) films, proliferated globally from the late 1980s, principally in independent films such as *Life According to Agfa* (Assi

Dayan, Israel 1992), *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chada, UK 1993), *À la vie, à la mort/ 'Til Death Do Us Part* (Robert Guédiguian, France 1995), *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, USA 1996), *Made in Hong Kong* (Fruit Chan, Hong Kong 1997), *The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, Denmark 1998), *Flowers of Shanghai* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan 1998) and *The Swamp* (Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/France/Spain 2001). According to her, the 1990s saw a growing trend for films constituting a slight variation on the pattern. These slightly newer narratives depict characters with no pre-existing relationship, whose paths cross – if at all – due to random encounters. Tröhler labels these mosaic films and examples include *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, USA 1993), *Beijing Bastards* (Zhang Yuan, China 1993), *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (Michael Haneke, Austria/Germany 1994), *Les Voleurs/Thieves* (André Téchiné, France 1996), *Amores Perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, Mexico 1999), *Code inconnu/Code Unknown* (Haneke, France 2000), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, USA 2000), *The Circle* (Jafar Panahi, Iran/Italy/Switzerland 2000) and *Babel* (Iñárritu, France/USA/Mexico, 2006). Although Tröhler herself underlines the flexibility of her taxonomy – since some films, for example, start off as a mosaic then tend towards a group – the distinction is useful for thinking about different narrative structures' role in translating the fragmented aspects of postmodern life (Tröhler 2007: 209-13; 391; 344). In this section I will therefore consider a handful of French rom-coms that can productively be thought of as containing significant mosaic elements. I will moreover suggest on the one hand that this sub-genre's component elements, most notably the chance encounter, respond neatly to some of romantic comedy's formal and thematic exigencies; on the other, I will analyse specifically how films with this particular structure translate social atomisation.

Once again capturing the *zeitgeist* promptly, a key example of the emergent tendency is *Amélie* (2001), which Wendy Everett has described in terms comparable to Tröhler's as *fractal*, or a 'filmic portrayal[s] of urban space which is no longer shaped by the linear mappings of modernity, but is posited as both entirely random and yet at the same time structured by complexity, simultaneity, and violent encounters' (Everett 2005: 159). Further mosaic rom-com instances include *Reines d'un jour/Hell of a Day* (Marion Vernoux, 2001), *Modern Love* (Stéphane Kazandjian, 2008) and *Je vais te manquer* (2009). As the dates of release show, these films have all been made in this millennium - although it is as yet not entirely clear in the French context whether they are truly multiplying, as Tröhler has evidence to suggest elsewhere. They are also all set in cities (usually Paris), and they all feature the kind of chance encounter to which Tröhler alludes

In one sense - and as reflected by my earlier discussion of *Décalage horaire*, *Où avais-je la tête* and *Clara et moi* - the chance encounter melds nicely with the classic rom-com idea of romance as miracle, in a way that takes in and goes beyond the realities of contemporary atomisation. This is even more conspicuous in *Je vais te manquer*, as a reference to a romantic 'sign' in her horoscope leads a character, Lila, to mistakenly assume stranger Olivier's gestures to his daughter through the glass partition of the departure gate at Charles de Gaulle Airport are directed at her. She therefore abandons her flight and summons him to a tryst over the Tannoy, which leads to an affair. The film also makes significant use of the kinds of formal bridges between storyline which Mar Azcona (2010: 39) finds common in multi-protagonist films, as for example when the same song playing on the radio connects different locations; furthermore, at times speeded up footage adds to the sense of frenetic activity propitious both for comedy and also for apprehending today's

multiply interlinked networks of human organisation, as several storylines unfold simultaneously.

The essential separateness on which the interweaving of human trajectories depends features as a greater source of anguish in both *Reines d'un jour* and *Modern Love*. For one protagonist of auteur Vernoux's mosaic rom-com, photo-shop assistant Marie, the 'violent encounters' of the city range from being impregnated by a stranger (the groom) in a back room at a wedding reception, to crashing her car into that of a stranger – a wealthy *bourgeoise* on whom she vents anger at the economic inequalities of their respective situations. Unlike in *Je vais te manquer*, romance provides little solace from the chaotic vicissitudes of daily life, as another character Hortense's obsessive pursuit of her married lover leaves her looking a fool, while Marie is left to deal with the repercussions of her pregnancy alone. As for *Modern Love*, this pointedly named film represents the most extreme case of a mosaic narrative in the corpus, in the sense that its central protagonists' interaction is kept to a bare minimum. The film depicts three entirely separate love relationships: between Eric and Marie; Jérôme and Elsa; and Vincent and Marianne. These protagonists have no relationship with each other. In fact, the end of the film reveals that Vincent and Marianne are characters in a film written by Eric, which Elsa sees at the cinema. Finally, these two characters, who have crossed paths just twice before in the film (once when Elsa saw Eric being dumped in a bar on New Year's Eve and another time in a lift) recognise each other vaguely and decide to have a drink. This leaves the possibility of this new, reshuffled romantic permutation open.

It is worth noting how considerably such loosely structured mosaic films vary Powrie's model invoked at the start of this chapter, of surrogate communities replacing family. That is, characters are left broadly adrift with little in the way of

interpersonal support networks at all. I have already indicated that this mosaic tendency mirrors larger shifts in global filmmaking and as such – alongside multi-protagonist films as a whole to a lesser extent – it has attracted some theoretical attention, to which I shall now briefly turn.

III. Theorising the multi-protagonist rom-com

The rise of the ensemble format has in fact been cited as a transcultural phenomenon over the past two decades (see Thompson 1999; Tröhler 2000, 2007 and 2010; Bordwell 2008: 211), for reasons which Mar Azcona (2010: 6-7) links on the one hand to ‘social, economic and political processes that have crystallized in concepts such as globalization, transnationalism, deterritorialization, and diaspora’, and on the other to changes in the field of intimate relations.¹⁵ The question of changes within intimate relations is one I will be returning to in detail later in this chapter; my intention so far here has been, rather, to apprehend the contemporary French rom-com genre at its point of intersection with broader developments in social organisation focused around urban fragmentation. Thus the global trend for embracing ensemble structures in cinematic storytelling of recent years finds its echo in this national genre – where it simultaneously fits neatly with a longstanding French fondness for the film *choral* in popular cinema (see Bruyn 2006), linked also to the possibility of displaying many star performers.

It is worth noting, with regard to the social meaning of such films beyond romance, that not only does the idea of ‘chorality’ in cinema have some of its roots in neorealism, and thus an impulse for socially committed filmmaking in the widest

¹⁵ Deleyto (2009b) has also suggested the possible beginnings of a trend for multi-protagonist organisation in US rom-coms very recently.

sense, in Hollywood it has been more often associated with art than mainstream cinema. Roland Barthes among others has questioned the centrality of the single protagonist in Western narratives, for which he blames the novel (1977: 108). Tröhler goes further in citing Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) concept of the rhizome as the best model for multi-protagonist films tending towards mosaic organisation. The rhizome is described here as an accented structure in which any point can be arbitrarily connected to any other *without hierarchical organisation*, bypassing the traditional structures of power implied therein (2007: 391). In envisioning romance across relatively randomly organised plot threads, then, films like these may have the capacity to shake off some of the old status relations conventionalised by many dyadic (and triadic) rom-coms, and to go beyond the simplistic binary conceptions of central characters based on contrast, difference and otherness endemic in rom-com. Attempting to capture something of contemporary reality's overwhelming multiplicity and contingency, their engagement with existential questions surpassing romance itself is in any case markedly prominent. At the same time, keeping in mind Mar Azcona's observations about iconic multi-protagonist rom-com *Singles* (Cameron Crowe, USA 1992) (on which the French *Célibataires* appears loosely calqued), it may be that ensemble films gain special appeal through an open structure, in which the viewer can be positioned as a further imagined member of the group of individuals depicted. In other words, such films may attempt to offset the loneliness they, at times, depict by instilling in the viewer a comforting sense of belonging – if only, paradoxically, through un-belonging – after all.

This section has examined the rise of multi-protagonist rom-coms in France in the light of the decline of the family. At the same time, I have attempted to analyse the

extent to which such films either translate or mitigate a climate of solitude, through formal analysis of different multi-protagonist structures, in turn associated with questions of realism and social commitment in cinema. In this regard the French cycle has been examined in the context of a broader global trend. In the next section of this discussion of postmodern social fragmentation I turn from examining the legacy of metaphorically absent fathers (i.e. families) to that of an absent Father, or God, for the French rom-com today.

Romance, Religion and Race

According to interracial rom-com director Roschdy Zem: ‘All couples are mixed couples’ (Attali 2006). Romance has certainly provided a significant trope for the negotiation of difference in fiction historically, and (appropriately) across diverse cultures. Moreover, while for Tarr with Rollet (2000: 133) ‘awareness of social divides’ has deepened in France since the mid-1990s, the rise of religious fundamentalism globally, gathering pace since 9/11, has specifically brought categories of faith and race to the forefront of public attention – as most famously in France through the well-publicised *affaire du voile*, the debate arising (also since the mid-1990s) around the wearing of the Muslim *hijab* in schools. Without delving into the highly complex socio-political factors behind the formation of particular groups or the execution of individual acts of territory- and identity-staking, the rise of religion can be seen as a function of postmodernity in two senses: primarily because of the threats to racial and religious identities produced by mass population shifts and diasporas on the one hand and the globalisation of culture on the other; secondarily, catalysed by postmodernity’s lack of firm social anchors and meaningful frameworks for existence. In this way, a number of French rom-coms of

the 1990s and 2000s respond to such changes by making racial and/or (related) religious issues a significant component of their interpersonal discourses.

I. 'God is great' – what about love?

Religion tends to be a significant absence rather than a direct theme in contemporary rom-coms. An exception is Pascale Bailly's *Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite/God is Great and I'm Not* (2001), analysis of which will be the subject of this section. The film stars Édouard Baer opposite Tautou, hot on the heels of her success in *Amélie* – although this film was in fact filmed three years earlier and delayed due to the withdrawal from the project of its original producer. The date is relevant, confirming that the film predates 9/11 by some years and cannot therefore be interpreted as a reaction to those events. Indeed, this film takes up those issues that underlie fanaticism at an earlier stage in its process of evolution, by positing romance and spirituality alongside one another as two possible palliatives for the malady of contemporary life.

The nebulous affliction of faithlessness is dramatised very early in the film by heroine Michèle's (Tautou) suicide attempt; later it continues to manifest itself through her mother's crippling depression. Sex and spirituality, meanwhile, are first interwoven by posters for the film showing a half-smiling Tautou with her eyes – and jaunty eyebrows – raised heavenward, holding up a votive candle, but one strap of her little black dress off her shoulder and Baer looking on appreciatively from behind [Figure 2]. This association is quickly reinforced by Michèle's first interaction with Baer's François, which leads to a passionate kiss in a church. It is remarkable that Bailly chooses to cut straight from this moment to a shot of the overdosed Michèle falling off a chair onto Baer the next morning, still overlaid with the

solemn Latin chants from the church, only subsequently returning to the interim night of passion in flashback.



Figure 2: Sex and spirituality in *Dieu est grand*

As the film progresses and Michèle lurches from her attempts at devout Catholicism into a faddish interest in Buddhism (she tries to meditate but, comically, falls asleep), her desperation to find serenity in any form emerges. The failure of family once again forms part of the background to this desperation, as Michèle has a troubled relationship with her step-father, he and her mother bicker ceaselessly and nor does she get on well with her sanctimonious older sister. Later on, her step-father in fact mirrors the role of saviour-rescuer played by God in Michèle's dream when she wakes up, with obvious symbolism, atop her real father's gravestone. Nor does Michèle's professional life as a model fulfil her. Although this is not shown to contribute directly to her unhappiness, it is portrayed as so un-engaging that she spends most of her time at work reading books about spirituality, her job's empty theatricality underlined by Michèle's excessive postures and gestures as well as her highly stylised makeup and costumes, including outsize false eyelashes, arresting

futuristic cosmetics and weird plastic clothing. When photographers do not end up deciding a shot is better with no models in it at all, a typical instruction is to ‘look vacant’! It should be noted that the film does hint, too, that the immediate motor for Michèle’s self-destructive act may have been the termination of a pregnancy unwanted by her ex-boyfriend Bertrand – a typically negative construction of abortion for the French genre (see also page 240); however, this is alluded to only in passing.

Complementing the narrative’s mobility between multiple Parisian locations, the film’s self-conscious form further conveys the existential restlessness displayed by Michèle. This includes an episodic and occasionally disorienting narrative structure, a home-video look created by a hand-held camera and numerous sequence shots, intercalated text, jump cuts, unusual camera angles (including overhead shots suggesting God’s perspective) and the use of slow-motion and coloured filters. This formal heteroglossia also mimics the facility with which postmodern magpie Michèle dips into different spiritual traditions according to her whim. In addition, occasional wipes and sepia tones combine with the 1970s look of most of the clothes and sets at the photo shoots to suggest a gnawing cultural nostalgia for times past.

While the film’s engagement with Catholicism and Buddhism remains superficial, Michèle’s decision to convert to François’ putative Jewish religion gives rise to a slightly more complex interrogation of the meaning of this identity (rather than the actual beliefs associated with it) in contemporary France, notwithstanding elements of comic caricature. The film’s major source of humour is the contrast between veterinary scientist François’ ostensible disinterest in his faith and the zeal of the converted Michèle, alongside humorous foregrounding of some of the more apparently arbitrary and anachronistic aspects of religious rituals, which renders

them as being as much a masquerade as femininity has become in the photo studio. Michèle's inability to distinguish outer ceremony from inner spirituality is crystallised in her obsession with ritualised detail, which appears another outlet for the kind of childish puerility that will later be associated with Amélie Poulain (see Moore 2006: 14). In this film, immaturity is rammed home by the excerpted phrases from Michèle's journal that divide the film into sections, executed in (pre-)pubescent 'bubble writing' peppered with exclamation marks, as well as by instances of her skipping, bouncing on a bed, pouting and generally being unreasonable. François' characterisation, by contrast, speaks more seriously of the conflicted identity of French Jews today. Thus while he feigns nonchalance about his background, his angry response when asked by police for his papers that 'this isn't the Gestapo', like his paranoid overreaction to Michèle's gesture of hanging a Mezuzah outside the door of his flat ('Do you want everyone in the building to think I'm Jewish?'), betrays a deep-seated insecurity about his racial makeup that has particular resonance in a country like France which was Occupied, and 'cleansed', by the Nazis. Yet the strength of François' allegiance to his own heritage is reflected by the bitter argument – and ultimately break-up – he initiates after (falsely) accusing Michèle of failing to offer his mother a lift one day, when his Orthodox parents are visiting from Israel.

François meanwhile is as guilty as Michèle of confounding spirituality and corporeality, indeed carnality. Their relationship is presented as highly physical, including close-ups of their tongues kissing and numerous suggestive bedroom scenes, and François' final answer to Michèle's ongoing accusations of faithlessness is simply: 'I believe in you.' Leaving its couple nominally apart at the end, however, the narrative of *Dieu est grand* stops short of suggesting that faith in one other

special person is sufficient to shore up the individual against the uncertainties of modern society.

II. The mixed couple and the other

In this section I examine how a number of films use couples of mixed races and/or religions to touch on similar issues of the relationship between religion, race and romance in more secondary ways than does *Dieu est grand*. These couples' construction reveals a variety of attitudes towards otherness within the films, while the viewing position addressed is most often a more 'enlightened' one, offering the idealised reconciliation in which the genre specialises.

At one end of the spectrum, blatant racism is satirised in *Je vais te manquer* and *Tellement proches* (Nakache and Toledano, 2009). In the first film, a macho immigration officer constructed as pathetic is prejudiced against Arabs because his wife left him for one. In the second, a running joke sees a black doctor (whose girlfriend and social milieu are white) repeatedly mistaken for a cleaner at the hospital where he works. The fact that this is set up as a source of humour suggests the extent to which low-level racism is a social norm.

The day-to-day complications of inter-ethnic unions feature more prominently elsewhere. In *Ma Femme est une actrice/My Wife is an Actress* (Yvan Attal, 2001), a Christian-Jewish couple features in the shape of protagonist Yvan's sister Nathalie and her husband Vincent. In this case, the problems mixed religion partnerships can cause are brought to the viewer's attention by several scenes in which Nathalie and Vincent's continual and bitter bickering focuses on the divisive issue of their child's potential circumcision. In *Mariage Mixte* (Alexandre Arcady, 2004), a Jewish patriarch's resistance to his daughter's engagement to a gentile

provides the central conflict, although the narrative focuses solely on the cultural trappings of Judaism, stereotyped to humorous ends, and moreover soon collapses the difference of faiths into straightforward paternal possessiveness. In both cases, the happy couple is finally united.

A more considered exploration of the possibility of inter-faith union is offered by *beur* actor-director Roschdy Zem's 2006 rom-com *Mauvaise foi/Bad Faith*, in which Zem stars as Muslim Ismaël opposite de France's Ashkenazi Jewish Clara, mirroring his own real life union with his Jewish wife. Critics saw the film, which ends happily, as a plea for tolerance (Anon 2006c; Baudin 2006). In interview, Zem explicitly likens Clara and Ismaël's sudden impulse to embrace their respective faiths more fully following arguments between them – catalysed by her pregnancy – to young people's new tendency to take refuge in religion (Attali 2006).

It is significant that this film is less broadly comical than, say, *Dieu est grand*: a scene in which the couple fall out bitterly when Ismaël finds it difficult to accept Clara putting her career before family stands out for highlighting a serious cultural controversy around the place of women in Islam, and the difficulties of reconciling such attitudes with Western liberalism. Elsewhere, background extracts from the television news focus on the Israeli-Palestine conflict. At one point in *Dieu est grand*, Michèle admits to being unsure whether it is acceptable for her to laugh at a humorous film set around the atrocities of World War Two and François responds that it *is* a comedy. It is tempting to conclude that the events of 9/11 and its legacy have made cultural issues with a link to race and religion something less of a laughing matter.

It is revealing to consider, too, the question of casting in mixed couple films. Neither Édouard Baer, Cécile de France nor Olivia Bonamy (of *Mariage Mixte*) is

known as Jewish, perhaps somewhat lessening the power of their on-screen union with non-Jews to persuade viewers of the acceptability of such pairings. An actor who *is* increasingly famed for his Judaism, though, is Jean-Pierre Cassel (not least through the prominence of his son Vincent personifying the Jewish character in global auteur hit *La Haine* [Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995]), who plays the father in both *Dieu est grand* and *Mauvaise foi*. The presence of parents is already noteworthy in underlining the importance of race and religion as markers of familial continuity (see also Chapter 4), and in *Mauvaise foi* it is notably Clara's family and her father in particular whom Ismaël fails at first to charm. At the same time, it is worth flagging up the newness of veteran Cassel's association with Judaism, absent from his roles and star persona for the many decades prior to the late 1990s in which he had worked in cinema. This change is itself a barometer of the reification of ethnic-religious identities in a Western society like France in recent years.

Finally, it should be noted that some rom-coms do feature mixed race couples, without commenting on this aspect of difference, but rarely. Examples include *Belle maman/Beautiful Mother* (Gabriel Aghion, 1999), *L'Âge d'homme...maintenant ou jamais!* (Raphaël Fejtö, 2007) and *De vrais mensonges*. A typical attitude is displayed by teenpic/rom-com *LOL (Laughing Out Loud)* (2008). Here the fact that the protagonist's best friend Stéphane (a girl) is dating an Arab, Mehdi, is not a source of conflict; however, the film still makes one circumlocutory reference to his racial makeup, when a friend jokes that he doesn't have the monopoly on being a victim of discrimination. In fact, the presence of Mehdi in *LOL*'s clique of sixteenth *arrondissement* schoolchildren smacks of the political correctness of a Benetton advertisement and ends up only highlighting the undeniable truth that the genre remains overwhelmingly white and middle class.

Indeed, it is remarkable that racial and/or religious otherness in rom-com's mixed couples bypasses entirely related class issues.¹⁶ Even *Mauvaise foi*, for all its commitment to tackling serious contemporary issues, does not bring class disparities into the equation. While the other rom-coms I have cited focus on groups widely identifiable with the middle classes (Jews and Christians), as an investigation of Arab identity, Zem's film diverges notably from the vast majority of similar projects generally grouped under the heading of *beur* cinema, in ignoring questions of economic exclusion. While making Ismaël an educated and urbane jazz music teacher may avoid clichés, it also avoids some inescapable realities. On the other hand, the presence of ethnic minorities in the overwhelmingly middle-class milieu of the rom-com also charts and has helped to legitimise the modest rise of a black and *beur* middle class in France.

Romances involving mixed couples also illustrate the tendency of the contemporary French rom-com, when it does choose to put romance in dialogue with questions of religion and race, to conceive these categories almost exclusively in terms of identity, as cultural markers – as opposed to engaging with issues of spirituality. Acknowledging this tendency in his film, Zem underlines the autobiographical aspect of *Mauvaise foi*'s portrayal of people culturally aligned with their religious backgrounds, but divorced from real connection with any spiritual dimension, which he describes as 'the norm' (Attali 2006). While Zem's romance is actually more marked by conflict than most comparable narratives in the corpus, it should be noted that the genre's secular approach also generally skirts around more acute cultural clashes between religions. As a result, intervention in the most bitter

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The early precursor to the current cycle *Romuald et Juliette* is here an exception.

ethnic-religious feuds remains, for now at any rate, largely beyond the reconciliatory scope of national romantic comedy.

This section has argued that, although there is as yet only tentative evidence for an intensification of the linkage between partner choice and ethnic-religious identities in rom-com, the fact that these identities are becoming more meaningful for at least some people is reflected, and endorsed as understandable to a limited extent, in the genre, across Christian, Arab and Jewish communities. The confrontation staged in this section between the contemporary rom-com and the increasing visibility of religion and race in Western identities, moreover, epitomises the way in which this chapter has up to now sought to place the genre in the wider context of contemporary history and cultural studies. This has been notably in recognition of the changed status and nature of narratives about interpersonal unions in an era characterised by social fragmentation and endemic loneliness. In the remaining half of the chapter, my focus will narrow to consider the French rom-com's negotiation of recent changes specifically in the field of interpersonal and especially coupling relations.

POST-ROMANCE

In Chapter 1, I argued that romance is a discourse, rooted in fiction. It would be more precise, though, to say that cultural ideas about romance in its broadest everyday sense, denoting love between two unrelated individuals who are usually but not always heterosexual, bring together a babbling polyphony of discourses. These discourses are differently inflected across both place and time and are in essence mercurial. Indeed, one of the difficulties underlying attempts to define romantic comedy is the multiplicity of meanings attached to the concept of romance itself as a

kind of love. This version of love was promulgated most extensively through the literary form of medieval romance. In other words, romance in life as well as art always alludes to a fictionalised – and so unstable – narrative. In this way it points back to a chain of signification with no origin: it is a construct. Nonetheless, in this section my aim will be to try to pin down some significant features of cultural notions about love relationships of this kind as they pullulate in contemporary France via rom-coms. To this end, I borrow substantially from Shumway's (2003a) seminal study of *Romance, Intimacy and the Marriage Crisis* in latter day North America and particularly his elucidation of what he calls the discourse of intimacy. While Shumway finds this discourse, which both overlaps with romance and exists in opposition to it, in full flower in the US in the 1970s, it is a central argument of this thesis that the ideas associated with intimacy are more widespread in the past twenty years in France. However, given the variety of cultural notions jostling with one another in the rom-com during this period, while recognising the central importance of the concept of intimacy, I have preferred to summarise the contemporary situation under the rubric of 'post-romance'. This label recognises the way in which romance presupposes and entails its successors and rivals for cultural centrality, as well as its own ongoing pertinence. For this reason, I will start by analysing the relevance of the tradition of romance itself for French romantic comedy, in conjunction with the closely related national tradition of adultery. In the second and third sections of the chapter I will examine, in turn, two facets of the post-romantic contemporary landscape on display in rom-coms: the reach of the discourse of intimacy and the latter's relationship with a recent trend for a return to ostensibly highly romantic values.

Romance and adultery

Despite the elusiveness particular to romance, it is immediately associable with mystery and the extraordinary. Attempts to define it in its original literary manifestation focus on love outside marriage, wedlock being perceived as ordinary and familiar. In his study, Shumway suggests in this vein that narrative romance requires a triadic structure, which may involve a love triangle or another third character, ‘enshrin[ing] the obstacle as the indispensable element’ (Shumway 2003a: 14-5). Indeed, he argues that romance and marriage are incompatible (Shumway 2003b: 396-400) and even accuses romance of covertly sanctioning adultery (Shumway 2003a: 178).

However, Shumway also claims that, while the medieval and early modern context took for granted the incompatibility of love and marriage, first Shakespearean comedy and later the Romantic ideology of the nineteenth century wished to conflate the two. While this historical development considerably complicates the picture of attitudes to coupling, it is nonetheless not entirely dissociable from pre-existing ideas about marriage as alliance: Shumway notes most historians agree that there emerged in the seventeenth century a new form of union dubbed by Lawrence Stone ‘the companionate marriage’. The significance of this development for the present discussion is down to its contrastive value with concurrent events in France, where there developed in aristocratic circles a convoluted social code for adulterous love labelled by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1986: 63) *amour passion*. This discourse, circulated by manuals, conceived seduction as a game wholly removed from marriage, as immortalised the following century by Choderlos de Laclos’ epistolary novel *Les Liaisons*

dangereuses and its various theatrical and filmic adaptations and spin-offs (Shumway 2003a: 16-21).

Notwithstanding the seismic ideological shifts that have taken place since the seventeenth century, the ongoing French adulterous tradition is reflected in classical national cinema by the frequent focus of the *comédie boulevardière* on how to sustain marriage in tandem with adulterous liaisons. This feature is cited by Rollet, in her discussion of the historical absence of rom-com in France, to support an argument that ‘French culture does not place the same importance on, or view marriage as the USA traditionally does’ (Rollet 2008: 93-4).¹⁷ This is a complex issue and it might be more accurate to conjecture that marriage in France has been considered not so much as less important, but rather as less a question of romance, as within comedy adulterous narratives tend in fact to preserve the social institution of marriage intact. It is true, though, as this study will show, that the contemporary French rom-com fairly frequently rejects the classic post-Shakespearean ‘Hollywood’ happy ending focused on a newly united couple, preferably marrying. Considering that this is a change which Evans and Deleyto (1998: 2-9) have in fact picked out in the rom-com globally from the 1970s to the 1990s, it would be possible to make a case for French rom-com’s rather limited embrace of this convention simply as a function of global influence’s timing. But the legacy of *amour passion* via theatrical comedy surely *is* an important factor in French romance narratives’ relative eschewal of happy endings focused around marriage, given the frequency with which theatrical farces were directly transposed to film in the classical era (cf.

¹⁷ Cf. Stanley Cavell (1981: 20) argues the absence of adultery distinguishes screwball comedies focused on married couples from French farce.

Sellier 2010: 153).¹⁸ Certainly a relatively high proportion of French rom-coms deal with the issue of adultery. In other words, in fact, Evans and Deleyto chart a shift that makes the format more compatible with the kind of narrative structures already favoured in France.

Unsurprisingly, however, given the multiple influences on contemporary French rom-coms it is possible to map both diachronically and exogenously (see also Chapter 5), far from simply celebrating adultery in the boulevard style, Gallic examples of the genre present such behaviour from varying perspectives. These range from depictions of ongoing male infidelity, viewed with differing degrees of tolerance, to the rise of defiant visions of female promiscuity. In this section, after examining these two opposing poles in the adultery narrative, I attempt an overview of the spectrum of ostensibly old-fashioned and more modern attitudes towards romance and adultery on display, in order to argue that the texts in my corpus are frequently irreducible to the political status of merely either regressive or progressive narratives.

I. Libidinous Lotharios

Adulterous men feature in several rom-coms of the 1990s and 2000s, with some sense emerging of a shift from humorous acceptance towards dramatic questioning over the period. Starting with the 1990s, at least two hit rom-coms of the decade appear simply to accept the old binary of long-term love and passion as irreconcilable: *Le Zèbre* (Jean Poiret, 1992) and the Gérard Depardieu vehicle *Le Plus beau métier du monde/The Best Job in the World* (Gérard Lauzier, 1996), both attracting just under two million theatrical spectators. The later film is the more

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Sellier discusses the legacy of the tradition of ‘male libertinage’ for New Wave cinema.

frankly reactionary of the two, presenting womanising as one of the ‘endearing’ foibles of its generally loveable protagonist. Despite his repeated claims about his supposed femininity, Depardieu is not known for his progressive attitudes towards women either as a star, notably through his roles in the films of Blier, or in his personal life, following the controversy surrounding his alleged claims about involvement in a rape incident (in fact mistranslated [Vincendeau 2000b: 217]). Here, as in so many other films, his on-screen persona is that of the loveable rogue. His character Laurent is set up as a focus for the audience’s sympathies when, following his wife’s discovery he is having an affair and subsequent departure from home, he is forced to take a job as a teacher in a rough school in the Parisian *banlieue* in order to remain near to her and his child. Laurent’s bravery, dedication and professionalism in the classroom and when faced with the local toughs on his estate play out shoulder-to-shoulder with a romantic plot that sees him courting, and deceiving, both his wife and a colleague, Radia, simultaneously. Infidelity is treated, in fact, as a big joke, as Laurent muddles up conversations he has had with each woman, a detail that also suggests the women’s interchangeability as sex objects for him. Laurent’s hypocrisy (and the women’s asymmetry) is spectacularly revealed at a weekend gathering unexpectedly attended by both women, following a mix-up en route that has left each with one of the other’s shoes. Yet while he is momentarily embarrassed, and his wife leaves in fury, Laurent and Radia are (re)united *deus ex machina* at the end of the film.

Although it was made four years earlier, *Le Zèbre*, based on a popular novel and blending high comedy with melodrama, is somewhat more complex than *Le Plus beau métier* on the discrepancies between passion and commitment. The film’s protagonist is the archetypal comic eccentric, zany notary Hippolyte (Thierry

Lhermitte), who constantly jokes and is described by one of his friends as ‘un drôle de zèbre’, or, roughly, an oddball. Plagued by the romantic intimation that ‘love is youth and fantasy’, as his highly valued marriage to Camille approaches its fifteenth anniversary, he elaborates a complex plan to keep their flame alive. This involves feigning complacency and seducing her in the guise of a stranger (achieved, rather improbably, using anonymous notes and blindfolds). Thus Hippolyte is actually somewhat removed from the typical Lothario, as the only ‘infidelity’ in his marriage proves fake. Nonetheless, in identifying himself positively with a romantic Casanova archetype, in his quest to lure his own wife, this character adheres to the belief that marriage is on its own second best. And this is true especially when it comes to the libido, since the scene in which he seduces his blindfolded wife clad in skimpy silk negligée, thanks to the camera’s lingering play on Camille’s skin, channels all the erotic charge shown to be absent from their home life. At the film’s close, the apparent staging of Hippolyte’s own death on a trip to the site of their honeymoon appears another measure designed to prevent her feelings from dampening into quotidian banality. However, the final twist reveals that he has in fact committed suicide in order to ensure that their love remains eternal, in a tragic ending that laments the incompatibility of the ideals of the companionate marriage and the drama of *l’amour passion*.

As indicated, nor are filmic legitimisations of this traditional opposition by any means means absent from rom-coms post-2000. For example, in *Ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d’enfants/And They Lived Happily Ever After* (Yvan Attal, 2004), wife Gabrielle (Charlotte Gainsbourg) opts to put up with her husband Vincent’s (Attal) affair because she loves him, despite his actions’ apparent negative effect on her emotional state and their home life. This effect is potently underlined the

morning after his first (within the narrative), ill-concealed indiscretion by jerky, close-range camerawork, isolating the couple in the domestic space, and a nervy percussion and piano score. In contrast, when Gabrielle is tempted herself to have a fling with a stranger played by totemic feminine idol Johnny Depp, she prefers to stick to fantasising. A comment in reference to her character by Vincent's friends in a late scene, that some guys have all the luck, endorses her long-suffering behaviour, as she clears the dinner table cheerily while Vincent telephones his mistress. Equally, an ultimately male viewpoint extends to the presentation of the secondary object of husband Vincent's affections, Chloé, who is initially filmed fragmented and out of focus [Figure 3] and gains only limited contours as a character later in the film: although she is in love with Vincent, she appears to have accepted at least on some level that he will not leave his wife, and the effects of his exploitative behaviour on her are given little exposure.



Figure 3: The mistress as object in *Ils se marièrent*

However, a critical counter-strain towards the wandering male emerged in the mid-1990s, particularly though not exclusively in female-authored films, epitomised by Sandrine Veysset's tragic semi-autobiographical family drama about a careworn mother of seven whose husband thinks nothing of leaving her to look after

the farm while he attends to his second family, *Y'aura-t-il de la neige à Noël?* (1996). Rom-coms are no exception. Some early critiques of adultery achieved by showing its effects on the wives who are its victims are included in *Les Marmottes/The Groundhogs* (1992, directed by Élie Chouraqui but co-scripted with Danièle Thompson), where a rare jump cut underlines betrayed Frédérique's (Jacqueline Bisset) anguish when she realises her husband has cheated; gay comedy *Pédale douce* (1996), which dedicates substantial narrative space to the distressing situation of jilted wife Marie (popular comedienne Michèle Laroque, also the wronged wife in *Le Plus beau métier*); and *On connaît la chanson/Same Old Song* (1997, directed by Alain Resnais but co-scripted with Agnès Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri), where the same courtesy is extended to the plight of unsuspecting Odile (Sabine Azéma). It is significant that these roles are all played by well-established actresses.

While adultery persists, then, in French rom-coms, it no longer benefits from the same level of social acceptability as in earlier eras. Even those rom-coms that tolerate it to some extent also present some opposition to it, while in several cases it is actively decried. These examples tend to see adultery as a male 'problem'. As we will see in the next section, the same negative connotations do not apply when adultery is associated with women.

II. Contemporary carnival and the cuckold

The French adulterous tradition has not in fact been the preserve of men. Rather, Grossvogel describes such narratives as generically concerned with mockery of men (2005: 83), while Mikhael Bakhtin (1984: 243) in his writings on the medieval carnival alludes to a comic Gallic tradition of female violence against patriarchy.

Today, too, alongside those rom-coms which simply frown on adulterers, another set of films prove at once more light-hearted in their presentation of the issue and more vituperative towards philanderers, by having wives administer to their husbands a dose of their own medicine. This trend echoes very clearly Kathleen Rowe's (1995) description of the Bakhtinian possibilities of comedy for reversing hierarchies and placing the laughing woman, symbolically, on top – a model examined directly in the next chapter. It also reflects women's changed social status in an era where they no longer necessarily need – at least in economic terms – to grin and bear it when faced with male adultery.

Chronic adultery is the principal misdemeanour for which Alain Chabat's Laurent is punished in box office smash *Gazon maudit/French Twist* (Josiane Balasko, 1995), by his wife having an affair with another woman. The fact that he considers his affairs unrelated to the true love he claims to feel for his wife, despite his deception of her, satirises the historical attitude separating marriage and adultery. His wife Loli's admission to her soon-to-be lover Marijo that she has already forgiven Laurent for one affair also suggests the way in which female compromise can facilitate male complacency. Similarly, cheating is one of the marks of disrespect extended by inconsiderate Bertrand (Vincent Pérez) towards his beautiful and saintly wife Marie-Dominique (popular star Sophie Marceau) in *Je Reste!* (Diane Kurys, 2005), for which he too is finally rewarded, when her patience runs out, by her having an affair of her own. Exactly the same trajectory occurs, too, in comedienne Valérie Lemercier's spoof of the Charles and Diana story, *Palais Royal!* (2005) - in which she also stars - with the humiliation experienced by Prince Arnaud (Lambert Wilson) compounded by his wife's transformation from *housefrau* to gym-toned knockout and her love affair with the national media.

In these broadly mainstream comedies detailed above, adultery indulged in by women may be at least partly ascribable to an impulse for revenge. Two more ‘artistically’ positioned auteur films use the narrative device reclaims female desire even more unequivocally for its own sake. There is a suggestion that César-winning *Quand la mer monte* (2004) reinvents the classically shady figure of the adulteress as a plump, gentle middle-aged performance artist [Figure 4]. Thus snippets of phone calls hint that Yolande Moreau’s Irène has left a significant other at home, as she embarks on an affair with a puppet-maker while touring Northern France with her one-man show. As with Lemercier’s film, the fact that the possible adulteress is played by director Moreau herself speaks to Rowe’s emphasis on auteur performers and triumphant joke-makers (and indeed Moreau physically resembles Roseanne Barr, Rowe’s preeminent example). One year later, Béatrix (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi) in Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau’s musical comedy *Crustacés et coquillages/Cockles and Muscles* (2005) does as so many male cinematic predecessors and enjoys an affair without considering there is anything specifically wrong with her own, in this case sexually active and healthy, marriage. As in *Quand la mer monte*, unlike with the traditionally needy female victims of adultery in rom-coms, it is Béatrix’s lover who would like more from the relationship than the fun she seeks. While less apparent than with *Quand la mer*, carnival is still a relevant reference point for this story of transgression outside the everyday, in the liminal space of a holiday, in which celebratory song takes over the narrative for the grand finale.



Figure 4: An ordinary adulteress? Yolande Moreau of *Quand la mer monte*

The question of transgression in all these adulterous films is in fact not straightforward. In this section, I have first suggested that female adultery conceived solely as revenge *against patriarchy* remains a limited revolt in the sense of ceding the status of central reference point to the old guard. Secondly, I have posited some seemingly more radical alternatives where female desire is itself offered as a powerful libidinal and narrative drive. I would like in the final section of this discussion to spend a little longer asking how we might assess the politics of these latter and other comparable films from the point of view of gendered cultural assumptions about romance and adultery.

III. Transgression and progression – or regression?

Crustacés et coquillages retains a celebratory sense of sexual openness as overwhelmingly positive not only through the fantasy elements of its musical space but also by having Béatrix's husband Marc busy with independent sexual pursuits. The fact that Marc's (Gilbert Melki, described by *France-Soir* journalist Richard Gianorio [2005] as 'Melki-the-virile') own secret urges are homosexually inclined suggests the need, in a society where divorce is rife and cheating therefore not only less tolerated but less alluring, to look beyond the simple adultery narrative to

achieve a sense of transgression, with all its illicit appeal. This is a drive that recurs in the genre in recent years.

Almost identical to *Crustacés* on this point, for example, is *La Vérité ou presque/True Enough* (Sam Karmann, 2007). Like *Détrompez-vous* (Bruno Dega, 2007) and Danièle Thompson's aptly named *Le Code a changé* (2009), this film presents a third alternative to either the Lothario or the woman-on-top narratives, in depicting a mixed sex group where both genders indulge in adultery, which is neither presented as without emotional consequences nor as the blackest of sins. To add shock value, this time, chronic womaniser Marc (François Cluzet) is drawn into a dark alley by an older gay acquaintance to engage in an act hidden from our eyes but whose transgressive status is underlined by the usually insouciant character's own horrified reaction and pleas for discretion. Although it was released five years earlier *Embrassez qui vous voudrez/Summer Things* (Michel Blanc, 2002) takes things even further. In this ensemble piece, the couple given most narrative space, Elisabeth (Charlotte Rampling) and Bertrand, in their 60s with an adult daughter, are bored with one another. When he sends her on holiday alone, leaving him to enjoy some intimate time with a hermaphrodite colleague, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery, sharing a kiss with new acquaintance Lulu (Carole Bouquet) and a night of passion with a friend's sixteen year old son, Loïc. The latter is also shown (although not graphically) masturbating; while another couple in the ensemble enjoys recreational bondage. Like its title (literally, *Kiss Whoever You Want*) – and in contrast to the portrayals of freedom as loneliness and lack of meaningful connection detailed earlier in this chapter and later in my case study – *Embrassez* espouses a law of desire based on the individual, a discourse of pansexuality similar

to that found in the ultra-‘liberated’ *Sex and the City* television show (Henry 2004: 79).

However, despite their apparent nonchalance about diverse sexual matters and therefore potential surface shock value, these films adhere to an old-fashioned ideal of romance as outside socially recognised forms of coupling, in so doing ennobling the libido. Indeed, a character in *La Vérité ou presque* observes that ‘love can last forever but not all the time, *that’s* the truth’. Seen in this light, they mediate a traditionally – in fact, mediievally – romantic perception that extra-marital (like pre-marital) love may provide something which marriage cannot. This has great resonance in a French context: indeed, one way to understand the French adulterous tradition is in relation to the stress placed on human freedom by Gallic culture. Discussing this topic in relation to cinema, Carolyn Durham (1998: 126-7) cites Liah Greenfield’s historical study of the development of French identity, where the national conception of freedom is described as ‘intensely individualistic’ and ‘unqualified in its rejection of all authority and limitations (including those imposed by the rights of other individuals)’ (Greenfield 1992: 523). Beyond the question of local mores, the adulterous sensibility moreover echoes sociological work which claims – grist to the mill for Freud’s (1958: 183) arguments about the idealising tendencies of desire – that romance is unsustainable once the love object has been obtained (see Mitchell 1966).

Between libidinous Lotharios, carnivalesque women-on-top and agents of (ostensible) transgression, adultery proves an ongoing central reference point in contemporary French romantic comedy. Yet there is some movement away from the older acceptance of cheating as integral to marriage, with the damaging

psychological effects of emotional treachery gaining narrative space. The fact that this drama of victimisation features female characters, like the proliferation of vengeful adulteresses, is linked to female authorship. At the same time, at a moment when women in Western societies apparently account for around 30% of adultery, with this figure on the rise (Taylor 2011), the adultery indulged in by both sexes in such films as *La Vérité ou presque* and *Détrompez-vous* may well resonate with audiences as redolent of real experience. Adultery may have been deglamourised to an extent by the rise of divorce but these films attest to the fact that it is very far from dead in France today.

The Trappings of Intimacy

If nineteenth-century thought wished to reconcile romance and marriage, in the wake of this attempt, according to Shumway, there grew up a different discourse that he dubs intimacy, which can be seen as one answer to the promotion of companionship in long-term relationships today. In this section I attempt to unpack this post-romantic discourse and to examine its importance for contemporary French romantic comedies.

Both an expression of post-nineteenth century expectations of marriage and a response to the crisis they provoked, intimacy attempts to pick up where romance left off in ‘provid[ing] a model for the continuing expression of emotion’. For Shumway the discourse burgeons in earnest after World War II and takes firm hold during and since the 1960s, as the women’s movement and the doctrine of free love dealt further, definitively crippling blows to the already crisis-ridden institution of marriage and to traditional ideas of heterosexual romance as a whole (Shumway 2003a: 18-27). In film, he links it closely to what he calls ‘relationship stories’,

emblematically in the films of Woody Allen and Paul Mazursky during the 1970s – by and large the same cycle of films referred to by Krutnik as ‘nervous romances’ but also ongoing in rom-coms since then (ibid: 157-87).

The actual features of intimacy as it is circulated by discourse are only slightly more concrete than those of romance. In his discussion Shumway closely links it with the popularisation of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis and therefore with self-disclosure, emotional openness, the substitution of friendship for passion as the Holy Grail of relationships and the idea that some individuals are better suited to one another than others (rather than being the romantic ‘one and only’ person for each other [see Giddens 1992: 61]). These moves away from romantic mystification frequently go hand in hand with stylistic tropes associable with a drive for greater naturalism – although the fact that these include framing devices foregrounds the unfixed nature of the concept of realism. Furthermore, in accordance with the discourse’s burgeoning during the 1960s and 1970s in particular, narratives of intimacy tend to offer more progressive roles for women. This frequently extends to exploring couples’ sexual relations, and notably the issue of increasing female demands for fulfilment in this department, strictly banished from traditional romantic discourse (Shumway 2003a: 167-73). In other words, because sex is no longer mystified it is no longer the glue that binds the romantic couple. Extrapolating from this, intimacy might best be summed up as a conception of love in terms of compatibility and partnership transcending – that is, taking in its stride and going beyond – physical desire (cf. Neale 1992: 286).

One implication of this conception is that adultery narratives like those I have discussed above are informed by both romance (especially where bedroom scenes remain absent or merely titillating) and intimacy (especially when sex is more

casually presented). ‘Shocking’ films like *Crustacés et coquillages* or *Embrassez qui vous voudrez*, for their part, alternate between formal adherence to a romantic paradigm, which needs to make congress less immediately available to lend it allure, and espousal of a highly contemporary move to demystify the physical aspect of coupling, including through more actively desiring female characters, which shifts the burden of meaningful relationships away from the erotic. I will now examine further means by which this dethroning of erotics is achieved in a number of films of the corpus.

I. Screwball and other intimacies

One apparently rather paradoxical means by which the contemporary French rom-com seeks to acknowledge and move beyond the banality of sex is by looking back to the pre-promiscuity days of the US screwball film, a ‘sex comedy without the sex’ (Sarris 1998). Such films as *Ils se marièrent* (2004), *Hors de prix*, *Quatre étoiles/Four Stars* (Christian Vincent) (both from 2006), *Ce soir je dors chez toi/Tonight I’ll Sleep at Yours* (Olivier Baroux, 2007) and others complement the inclusion of casual (non-graphic) sex scenes with the kind of screwball behaviours common in the earlier cycle, which now appear to stand in not for sexual tension at all, but for an inexpressible intimate connection. In the two films from 2006, both set in the Carlton hotel at Cannes and indebted to Ernst Lubitsch in their evocation of romance against an anachronistic, luxurious backdrop, this is a question of fairly explicit pastiche, as mutually antagonistic male and female leads indulge in farcical capering, take on assumed identities and, in the case of *Quatre étoiles*, physically fight with one another. *Ils se marièrent* and *Ce soir* are more intermittently inflected by screwball sparring, in both cases in scenes that feature on their publicity materials

[Figures 5 and 6]. The rebalancing of priorities in favour of intimate connection (rather than sexual attraction) is particularly clear in *Ils se marièrent*, where the sequence in question, in which married couple Vincent and Gabrielle's love is figured through a zany food and pillow fight, is accorded more than two minutes of screen time. Their subsequent sexual congress is contrastingly brief and muted as the camera fades out from a discreet long shot of their entwined bodies. It is worth noting that Shumway (2003a: 81-2) does point out that screwball films in some ways prefigure intimacy narratives, just as Lent (1995) has stressed their emphasis on the companionate nature of relationships. At the same time, their conception of romance as a battle of the sexes appears fitting in France, where I have suggested there are reasons to suppose tensions between the genders run particularly high today. Additionally, sociologist Raymonde Carroll (1988: 63-9) has argued that the French in general value reciprocity in couple formation and often express intimacy through verbal negotiation and sparring (by contrast with Americans' preference for a relationship manifested as harmony and mutual encouragement).¹⁹



¹⁹ For a fuller discussion of the significance played by screwball behaviours in the contemporary French rom-com see Harrod (2013).



Figures 5 and 6: Screwball intimacy in *Ils se marièrent* and *Ce soir je dors chez toi*

Elsewhere in the genre, further marks of intimacy are in evidence. Psychoanalysis and/or an interest in characters' childhoods as background to their psychological makeup feature prominently, for example, in *Un divan à New York*, *Décalage horaire* and *Clara et moi*, among others. Films too numerous to list incorporate sex into the main body of the narrative, with those that dwell on the act in a plainspoken fashion being most typical of intimacy. In *Irène*, for example, the heroine's first night with François, about halfway through the film, shows them having sex which is so awkward that he pauses to ask her if she is enjoying it. When she apologises for being somewhat tense he puts on a CD of ocean sounds, only to prompt a fit of giggles from her and the pronouncement that it sounds like a toilet flushing! After a good laugh together, however, the sex between the couple improves. In this way, sexual harmony depends upon a prior meeting of minds.

Irène also displays another trait connected to intimacy as opposed to romance: suspicion of the happy ending. Thus the heroine of this film and her new lover are shown in the same location at the end of the film, but nominally apart, following a row. As I argue elsewhere ensemble rom-coms, frequent in France, disfavour the resolution of all storylines. Furthermore, this eschewal of uncomplicated resolutions goes beyond particular plots in multi-stranded narratives to include the central love stories of various dyadic (or triadic) French rom-coms, including those of – as well as *Irène – Gazon maudit*, *Un grand cri d'amour*, *Clara et moi*, *Si c'était lui* (Anne-Marie Étienne, 2007) and *Mlle. Chambon* among others. *Je reste!* is a case in point, closing with unexpected originality for an otherwise somewhat hackneyed triangular romance between a wife, her husband and her lover, making the fictional world of a character's novel merge with diegetic 'reality' to offer up a sequence of alternative endings.

A feature of many of these films' explorations of long-term commitment which relates closely to this discussion of 'intimacy' is pinpointed in Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey's suggestion that 'postmodern romance might be conceptualised as the condition in which romance itself has become *the obstacle* which the desirable love relationship must overcome' (1995: 37; original emphasis). *Mensonges et trahisons* (which at one point acknowledges the fictional origins of romance by having its protagonist reflect that love was invented in the middle ages to lend novelty to stories told to entertain the king) is particularly overt in its treatment of this paradox, offering Raphaël two relationship options which equate broadly to intimacy and romance. While Muriel is characterised as open, loving and willing to commit to Raphaël, Claire is a bombshell who has come to symbolise the unattainable to him ever since she rejected him at university. The film resolves

Raphaël's need to recognise the allure of romance as a mirage in order to embrace the real pleasures of intimacy. His remark that Muriel's best quality, her frankness, is also her worst, recalls Harry's declaration that he even loves several of Sally's irritating habits in *When Harry Met Sally*, a film analysed by Shumway as inflected by a realistic view of contemporary relationships he associates with the discourse of intimacy (2003a: 182). As one of the central characters puts it in *Toutes les filles sont folles* (2003), a rom-com whose framing documentary-style interviews with couples again pay homage to Reiner's film, 'great love' is loving someone for all their faults.

In all these ways, then, the French rom-com is marked by the new intimate discourse's insistence on companionship and partnership, not as inferior to romance but rather as its grown-up successor. *Ils se marièrent* is particularly overt but not untypical in its idealisation of even an intimate relationship, paradoxically for its very quotidian joviality. A handful of films, though, take this one step further and begin to blur the boundaries between intimacy and simple friendship.

II. The couple as social category

In blurring the boundaries between heterosexual love and other forms of social companionship, intimacy acts as a leveller taking romance off its pedestal to place the love relationship in question on a par with other social categories, including friendship. I discuss the growing importance of same-sex friendships (especially male) in rom-com in Chapter 3. It is interesting to recall in this context sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's comments about the importance of casual 'buddy' relationships within what he has dubbed a 'liquid modern' society: one characterised by interpersonal bonds that are only provisional (Bauman 2003: 34-5). Nonetheless, it is

also important to underline the fact that male-female friendships remain highly unusual in the French genre. This contrasts with Deleyto's (2003) observation that male-female friendships are beginning to gain some prominence as an alternative to romance in the global genre. Such relationships clearly represent a subversive activity with the potential to unsettle the very foundations of patriarchy, based as it is on heterosexual desire (Swain 1992: 153-4). Accordingly, in the French rom-com, not only are these relationships rare; where they do receive significant narrative attention, they are by and large neutralised through heterosexual union. Thus in *Célibataires*, as in *When Harry Met Sally* and *Singles* among other US rom-coms, friendship is the first step to intimacy between Ben and Nelly. *Pédale douce* and *Modern Love* emulate a different strain of global predecessors examined by Deleyto, in privileging friendship between a woman and a homosexual man. In the first case, though, Eva's relationship with gay Adrien (Patrick Timsit) largely gives way to a focus on a heterosexual romance between her and straight Alexandre (Richard Berry). These relationships in the end co-exist, as an idealised ending unites the trio, along with Eva's baby by Alexandre, which does at least suggest friendship offers something more than does heterosexual love. In *Modern Love*, the 'problem' is even more fully resolved, through the male character Jérôme 'going straight' because he falls in love with his best friend, Elsa.

It is perhaps unsurprising that French rom-coms especially should be highly circumspect about male-female friendships, since I have argued that French culture tends to differentiate the sexes more extremely than does its Anglo-American equivalent. Nonetheless, those rom-coms depicting groups of acquaintances discussed earlier in this chapter formally accord friendship and love parallel status. Indeed, if intimacy is all about contradiction, it is obvious that the ensemble form in

general, animated by a clamour of often discordant voices, is propitious for its staging. I have already referred to the frequency of this form in French rom-coms of the past two decades. To attempt now to concretise this claim, I have marked on my appended rom-com filmography of the period with a *c* for *choral* (ensemble) all those films that focus significantly on more than one romantic plot line. The statistics I have extrapolated from this list should be prefaced by caveats. I have noted from the outset that my filmography is not – cannot be – exhaustive. Additionally, the issue of a film’s ‘multi-protagonism’ is itself not straightforward. I have in this respect taken a broad sweep and viewed any films that present alternatives to a sole focus on the romantic couple or triangle as *choral*, including those that only examine two or three romantic plot-lines (as is notably the case with several of the family-focused rom-coms examined in Chapter 4). On this basis, I have found more than one third (43 out of 115) of them have this structure. To compare with Hollywood, in a discussion of that cinema’s targeting of varied audiences, Krutnik only briefly mentions ‘films that approach heterosexual coupling as part of a broader network of family [...] relations’ (2002: 137). More recently Mar Azcona has described this form as having ‘started to mushroom within individual films’ (2010: 100) in rom-coms globally since the genre’s reinvigoration in the 1980s. However, even compared to her sample list of 17 films, the figure in France appears remarkably high. This trend coincides with the *choral* form’s frequency in French popular cinema; however this in turn speaks of that cinema’s own commitment to a realist tradition that seeks to keep open contradictions, in this case about heterosexual partnerships in France.

While it has been suggested that French identity historically contains a strong strain of individualism, Carroll (1988: 61), comparing transatlantic conceptions of

the couple, has proposed that, while America imagines the couple in individual terms, the French see it as an element within society. Certainly, discussions of most of the ensemble films analysed so far have shown how they exploit the structure to explore the tension between the allure of individualism and its possible impact on other people, recalling a statement by Moine (2007b: 144) that, in general, French cinema retains a greater sociological dimension than American. Considering that romance, in the words of Rowe (1995: 111), traditionally ‘affirms “life” [...] over “virtue”’, or the individual over social order, as Mar Azcona (2010: 103) has also noted, the ensemble romance as a whole is self-evidently more compatible with the more pragmatic sensibility of intimacy.²⁰ Ensemble rom-coms refuse the privileging of one couple by focusing on several. Moreover, they tend to present characters encoded as more ordinary by narrative detail (as well as, inherently, by the form), at different stages of relationships, some of which do not end happily. For example, *Mariages!* (Valérie Guignabodet, 2004) makes little distinction between marriage and the other, frequently adulterous and equally frequently dissatisfying, relationships in which the characters who come together for a family wedding are involved. It thus depicts and questions the human need for both romance and intimacy across the board, pointing up the contradictions involved in such a negotiation between selfish needs and those of another person. By the end of the film, more couples have separated than been united and the ending substitutes the classic final image of a couple with an extended shot of recently emancipated former ‘victim’ wife Micky (Lio) walking into the distance alone. The fact that the film

²⁰ Although Shumway does not explicitly discuss the ensemble form, he does note that ‘identity is more pervasive in general’ in ‘relationship stories’ (Shumway 2003a: 162), while Allen’s ensemble piece *Husbands and Wives* (USA 1992) is one of the texts drawn on substantially in his illustrations.

attracted just under two million spectators, while partly attributable to a recognisable cast including, as well as Lio, Miou-Miou and Mathilde Seigner, suggests that its unresolved contradictions resonated with French audiences.

Mariages! is thus a prime example of the way in which the preponderance of the *choral* in French rom-com means that the kind of films Shumway calls relationship stories are a particularly significant feature of French the rom-com panorama of the last two decades. The interest in desire's social construction which goes hand in hand with this structure is also at one point explicitly evoked in the narrative, when an (unrefuted) allegation is levelled at bride Johanna that she may be marrying for the dress as much as anything. Revealingly, she is unable to deny the accusation. The power of social ideas about coupling is hinted at, too, in ensemble films *Le Goût des autres* and *Vénus Beauté*, when female friend characters in each case cause the heroine to reconsider a rejected lover by recounting their own missed or nearly missed opportunities and romantic dreams, and also in other rom-coms, through the attentions of a third party which play an equivalent role in making one protagonist realise the other's 'worth', be it through the generic convention of the wrong partner (*Quatre étoiles*) or through a secondary character (*Hors de prix*).

In this section I have charted a number of means by which French rom-coms of the 1980s and 1990s are marked to a significant degree by intimacy. This discourse can be seen both to take in and set itself up in opposition to romance and might best be summarised as love transcending physical desire. In addition to the rise of strong female characters, which is a general feature of Western society and fiction today (and marked in France not least thanks to a high proportion of female directors), these means include: a reorientation of the tropes of screwball to stand in for a deep

affinity beyond romance; the recurrence of a psychoanalytic perspective on relationships; the trivialisation of sex; the eschewal of uncomplicated happy endings; and a frank view of potential partners' imperfections, informed by a suspicion about the idealism of romance becoming an obstacle to love. Additionally, a few films push the boundaries of intimacy further by positing friendship as a substitute for love, albeit generally to a limited extent. Finally, I have argued that a French tendency to see the couple as a social category is indissociable from the high degree to which the national romantic comedy of the period is shaped by intimacy. This picture is not, however, complete without acknowledgement of an apparently contradictory movement to resurrect traditionally romantic values, which provides the subject of this chapter's next section.

Romance Reclaimed

Throughout my discussion of intimacy I have returned to the problematic question of its points of overlap with the very discourse it seeks to replace, romance. In fact, as Shumway points out, *both* discourses, thanks to their common roots in an already conflicted set of ideas, paper over troublesome internal contradictions. Not only that, but he goes so far as to argue that, while the discourse of intimacy has not necessarily retreated, no new ground has been broken since the 1970s, and traditional rom-coms are far more popular (Shumway 2003a: 27; 187). Despite the greater preponderance among French rom-coms of films marked by ideas about the everyday complications of relationships, the renaissance of the more traditional rom-com in global cinema since the 1980s has also had an impact here, as a closer look at first the global then the national genre will show.

Shumway's observations about a return to traditional rom-com production globally since the end of the 1970s are borne out by theorisations of cycles within the genre. The cycle of 'nervous romances' identified by Krutnik (1990) coincides roughly with Shumway's paradigmatic relationship stories. Two years later, Neale distinguishes these from the 'new romances' of the latter part of the 1980s described in terms of a reactionary return to traditional conceptions of romance and marriage. Specifically, he cites four key features of the new romance: the curing or marginalisation of any residual 'nervousness' or neurotic behaviour in (often) one character (French examples of which have already been offered in *Un divan à New York*, *Décalage horaire* and *Où avais-je la tête?*); a persistent endorsement and evocation of 'the signs and values of "old-fashioned" romance'; the triumph of conformity over deviance; and a narrative assertion of patriarchal values (Neale 1992: 294-8). More recently, Tamar Jeffers Macdonald [2007: 91; 97-8] has added 'a de-emphasising of sex' as insignificant or even as immature to the list of attributes of her comparable, updated category of 'neo-traditional' Hollywood romances.

Adding nuance to this schema without contesting its broad categorisations, Evans and Deleyto (1998), as well as noting that some rom-coms of the period resist them, suggest a degree of ideological diversity even within films that do fit them. Moreover, an essay by Krutnik (1998) in their collection makes a case for facets of the new romance actually building on, rather than reversing, innovations of the nervous romance. Specifically, for Krutnik, the new romance's emphasis on the miraculous nature of love via explicit reference to romantic texts, especially films and love songs (also picked out as typical by Neale), in fact evolves out of the nervous romance's simultaneous disavowal and signposting of the illusory nature of romantic love. Thus the new romance integrates, rather than throwing out, the

complexities raised by the nervous romance. Krutnik's comparison of *Annie Hall* with *When Harry Met Sally* looks forward to Shumway's analysis of the later film as combining romantic tropes such as extended references to *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, USA 1942) with features typical of the relationship story, including the central message of friendship as the optimum basis for coupling and the use of narrative frames and other self-referential strategies (Shumway 2003a: 179-82).

If reflexivity characterises the relationship story, Krutnik's stress on the overt artifice typifying the 1990s proliferation of rom-coms, such as through scenarios of deception, certainly suggests a similar drive to denaturalise the stories they tell and embrace a romantic aesthetic of fantasy (Krutnik 1998: 30-31; see also Krutnik 2002: 140). It is interesting that the parallels and distinctions between romance and intimacy should hinge here so pivotally on the question of self-referentiality, which is central to postfeminist (as all postmodernist) fiction and has proven a thorny issue for ideological critics of recent rom-coms. Particularly extreme examples of this tendency are provided by the spate of rom-coms produced in Hollywood since the mid-1990s telling stories of escape into either the past or imaginary worlds, which have been dubbed by Tasker and Negra 'retreatist', referring also to a regression to pre-feminist values.²¹ Tasker and Negra's label indicates their critical attitude towards these films: for these critics, overt fantasy does not excuse the films' endorsement of reactionary gender stereotypes (Tasker and Negra 2007: 15). On the other hand, in line with the ambiguities of postfeminism, it is possible to argue, as commentators on the global super-franchise *Sex and the City* have done (Akass and McCabe 2004: 179), that the use of postmodern distancing strategies, which

²¹ Examples given are *French Kiss* (Lawrence Kasdan, UK/USA 1995), *Kate and Leopold* (James Mangold, USA 2001) and *Someone Like You* (Tony Goldwyn, USA 2001); see also Negra 2008.

highlight romantic narratives' fictional status by including overtly fantastical, fairy-tale details, allows authors to foreground and explore contemporary women's persistent attraction to a myth that – and this is the key point – they recognize as such. Seen in this light, postfeminist romantic comedy can tolerate a playful nostalgia for the days of clearly delineated gender roles, which is in part aesthetic, without *necessarily* compromising ideologies that have moved on.²²

I will now turn to the French rom-com's intervention in this new romantic revival. My analysis will be organised around two categories that encompass the observations tracked by global scholars: firstly, films' construction of love as miracle and fantasy, partly through their parade of the signs of old-fashioned romance but also through more subtle details of mise-en-scène, and secondly how French films associable with new romance view marriage and commitment.

I Mythical romance

Quotations from pre-existing romantic texts, which act as a sign more through their familiar romantic ambiance than because of the specifics of their referents, are everywhere in the French genre. The prevalence of pre-existing love-songs is of particular note here, as films too numerous to list employ well-known love songs, often jazz classics, for their credit sequences and/or during scenes designed to elicit an emotional response. This strategy contains, too, a nod to transnational film culture, in the case of the numerous films which opt for American (or notionally American) songs (see also Chapter 5). One richly allusive example is *Les Marmottes*, where a scene in which the family gathers around the piano to sing 'As Time Goes

²²

The same argument is rehearsed in Harrod (2012: 229-30).

By' recalls both *When Harry Met Sally* and the keynote romantic text explicitly referenced by that film, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, USA 1942). Not only that but, in a hall-of-mirrors effect, *When Harry Met Sally* itself later takes the place occupied in its narrative by *Casablanca* as overt romantic reference point in self-ironising rom-com *Ma vie n'est pas une comédie romantique/It Had to be You* (Marc Gibaja, France 2007).

Les Marmottes was co-written with Danièle Thompson, who would later become a rom-com director specialising in the exploitation of cultural myths. While her debut *La Bûche* delights in inverting stereotypes (see Chapter 4 case study), her second film *Décalage horaire* makes humorous reference to both *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, USA 1934), by imprisoning its intolerant couple in one room, and *Pretty Woman*, through its union of a wealthy but neurotic businessman with a lower-class beauty (this time a beautician rather than a prostitute) who teaches him to 'lighten up'. Equally, just as a character scaling a wall to reach his love in *Les Marmottes* recalls the Rapunzel story, in *Fauteuils d'orchestre* the character linking the film's multiple romances, Cécile de France's Jessica, a country girl come to Paris in search of fortune, is part latter day Dick Whittington [Figure 7]. The voiceover by Jessica's grandmother, recounting her own experiences of searching for glamour years earlier, foregrounds the folkloric dimension, while Jessica's ability to open the eyes of the spoilt bourgeois around her to her childlike joy at life is, like her union with wealthy playboy Fred, the stuff of fairy-tales.



Figure 7: The archetypal *ingénue* in the big city in *Fauteuils d'orchestre*

Other films construct self-consciously artificial worlds either intermittently – as with musical numbers in *Clara et moi* and *Modern Love* – or throughout the main body of their narratives. Although *Il ne faut jurer...de rien!* (Eric Civanyan, 2005) is the only example in this corpus of French rom-coms to adopt a period setting, elements suggestive of a retreat into an unreal space where romance may flourish abound. Most obviously, staging is to the fore in a group of films that situate romance within theatrical settings. This is metaphorically true of the Parisian drag culture scene which provides a backdrop for the (primarily heterosexual) romance depicted in Gabriel Aghion's *Pédale douce* (1996). More literally, professional associations with cinema link the heroines of *Au suivant!*, *Ma femme est une actrice* and *Le Roman de Lulu* (Pierre-Olivier Scotto, 2001) to performance, while *Un grand cri d'amour*, *Fauteuils d'orchestre* and *Le Goût des autres* are all set around the theatre, each exploiting specific theatrical intertexts.

In addition, the holiday settings of *Les Marmottes*, *Hors de prix*, *Quatre étoiles*, *Embrassez qui vous voudrez*, *Coquillages et crustacés* and *Les Petits mouchoirs*, as well as the carnival space partly occupied by *Quand la mer monte* and *Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches* (see page 164), also speak to a sense of liminal

possibility associated with amorous encounters. In particular, the luxury elements of *Quatre étoiles* and *Hors de prix* not only echo the screwball but in so doing further amp up the audience's sense of what Holmes (2006: 123) has called the *dépaysement*, or pleasurable sense of unfamiliarity, that typifies romance. Indeed, in light of Cavell's (1981: 154) argument that wealth is particularly propitious for the expression of eroticism, it is striking in *Hors de prix* that Irène hijacks the 'one-and-only' romantic discourse in the context not of love but of money, when she remarks that a meal in an expensive restaurant makes her feel 'unique', while even her 'true' affinity with Jean is at first expressed through their shared love of an Italian cake. This blurring of romantic and materialist discourses, jointly expressed through consumerism, is visible, too, in those films featuring weddings centrally. As well as reflecting the current boom in the bridal industry, which can itself be linked to postfeminism (Tasker and Negra 2007: 11) and specifically to the ongoing investment in romance as staged construction, these potentially endorse the traditional patriarchal values associated by Neale with new romance. Exemplary here in the French genre are *Mariage Mixte* (2004), *Belle Maman* (1999), *Mariages!* (2004) and most recently *Pièce Montée/The Wedding Cake* (Denys Granier-Deferre, 2010). While *Mariages!* is, as I have indicated, in fact quite critical of the cultural power of the wedding narrative, the titular wedding cake of *Pièce Montée*, also translatable literally as 'staged play', again foregrounds the artifice surrounding the marriage ceremony. The importance of not only this ceremony but the institution that underlies it is the next question whose examination is invited by the new romance.

II Marriage and commitment

Implicit in the preceding discussion is the relative conformism of films that, at least to some extent, promote marriage and, in the case of those concerned with lavish wedding ceremonies, capitalism. Such narratives counterbalance intimacy's relativistic sense of relationships as contingent and unstable, which is particularly apparent in ensemble films, as these tend to leave some characters single. It should be stressed, however, that marriage itself is less commonly an overt goal of French rom-com narratives – especially by comparison with the wedding-obsessed Hollywood genre – than is (more intimate) long- or at least medium-term commitment, reflecting the institution's demotion all over the Western world in recent decades.

Whether or not marriage is specified, a particularly interesting feature of such narratives tends to be the uneven positioning of female and male characters in relation to longer-term commitment. Female 'desperation' for a 'serious' relationship is a cliché of the genre, already mentioned in relation to *Irène* and *J'me sens pas belle* and on which I shall expand in the next chapter. The films of Stéphane Brizé *Je ne suis pas là pour être aimé* (2005) and *Mlle. Chambon* (2009) are more insidious on this point, making female desire for commitment an assumption that need not even be spelt out. In *Je ne suis pas là pour être aimé* (2005), Françoise's sister mentions that she has waited 'so long' for her marriage. Given that she falls in love with someone else during the narrative, the suggestion is that she rushed into a partnership with an unsuitable man in order to marry someone. This is presented as understandable, since Françoise is an entirely sympathetic heroine, while her mother and sister's frantic planning of 'the big day' reflects social pressures to marry.

When it comes to men and commitment, however, the situation is rather different. Male unwillingness to commit is the plot motor in *Mensonges et trahisons* and, even more so, box office hit *Prête-moi ta main*, as Luis (popular comic Alain Chabat) devises a plan to stage a disastrous engagement in order to divert his sisters' and mother's entreaties for him to marry. In typical new romantic style, the deception scenario in which he and Emma (Gainsbourg) pretend to be courting leads to actual love. Luis' rebellious attitude contrasts with that of Irène, faced with similar pressure from her parents, in the film by the same name, where it is clear that their comments are only adding to her sorrow and loneliness. While Shumway (2003a: 167) suggests that female characters in relationship stories often learn that they can survive on their own, by contrast Mar Azcona (2010: 107), despite generally highlighting the compatibility of the intimacy discourse and the multi-protagonist film, argues that women are more often portrayed as commitment enthusiasts in ensemble films, and men as resistant. As Holmes has noted, the inclination to equate sex with emotional commitment appears stronger in women. She cites female children's earlier emotional development as one possible explanation. More convincing, though, are the social factors she adduces: the persistence of the sexual double standard in contemporary western culture, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, and the fact that women are still the main caregivers of children today, a key theme of Chapter 4 (Holmes 2006: 125). This produces a paradoxical situation where, thanks to the ruses of patriarchy, women seek out the very roles that have subjugated them historically. Viewed from this angle the contortions of Luis and others appear, as it were, mere 'playing hard to get' – a reading which the happy endings based around union tend to support. In general, many French rom-coms endorse the female desire to settle down as normal, healthy and to be 'indulged',

whether this involves marriage or other increasingly socially acceptable modes of long-term commitment.

This section has shown the extent to which the French genre, at the same time that it is instrumental in negotiating intimacy, dredges up old notions more typical of romance. Romantic ideas are manifested prominently by recourse to pre-existing romantic texts and related forms of quotation, through settings situating events in the ‘space of transformation and fantasy’ referred to in Deleyto’s definition of romantic comedy offered in Chapter 1, and through the elevation of marriage to a highly desirable status. Be that as it may, the genre’s enormous ideological variation not only across texts but often in the same film, as well as the distancing techniques associated with today’s romantic discourse, in the end makes it difficult to make definitive statements about its allegiance to romantic or other values. A prime example of this veritable crucible of ideas – as well as an illustration of several trends examined in the first half of the chapter – is provided by the following case study.

CASE STUDY: *Vénus Beauté (Institut)*/Venus Beauty Salon (Tonie Marshall, 1999)

While it was a reasonable box office success in France (1.2 million entries) and even did some business in the US (\$416,464), *Vénus Beauté (Institut)* is more immediately remarkable for its status as a rare rom-com to have achieved multiple awards at the French Césars, where it was nominated in seven categories and won in three, including Best Film and Best Director for Tonie Marshall. This is no doubt thanks to a combination of Marshall’s perceived auteur status at the time of the film’s release and its particularly overt engagement with such contemporary issues

as the kind of urban fragmentation that I have argued in this chapter is a recurrent backdrop to contemporary French rom-com narratives. The film presents additional interest for this analysis in its self-conscious oscillation between rejection and embrace of a romantic myth held up ostentatiously in inverted commas.

Vénus Beauté dramatises the romantic adventures of the workers at the eponymous Parisian beauty salon that provides the central hub of this film's surrogate family – although it is Angèle (Nathalie Baye) who attracts most narrative attention. The mostly female cast and the setting recall in passing classic rom-com *The Women* (George Cukor, USA 1939). Family itself is, as so often, shown to be deficient, in the case of Angèle since her father shot her mother (because he thought she was cheating on him), leaving her to be raised by two maiden aunts (played by veteran New Wave actresses Emmanuèle Riva and Micheline Presle, Marshall's mother). For her colleagues Marie (Tautou) and Samantha (Mathilde Seigner), family is to all intents and purposes absent; only salon owner Nadine (Bulle Ogier) spends Christmas with her sons. Colleagues, meanwhile, provide a limited substitute. Angèle displays a genuinely protective maternal attitude towards the younger Marie, when she attracts the attentions of a wealthy older customer; and at times the girls gossip chummily together. However, they also bicker and it takes Samantha's Christmas Eve suicide attempt following a rift with a man for Angèle to visit her – in hospital – outside business hours.

Work itself is ambivalently presented in *Vénus Beauté*. Marie and Nadine appear content enough, but look to liaisons with men to endow their existences with real meaning. Chronic flirt Samantha, however, actively dislikes the job. At one point she insults Nadine as a mere 'shopkeeper' and at the end of the film she leaves the salon to return to nursing, in which she has been trained. The harder realities of

the daily grind feature intermittently, as Angèle battles tiredness by taking a breath of air out of the tiny window in the back room, or the girls swap stories about repulsive customers and procedures. Significantly, a scene in which a male customer requests a massage ‘with all the trimmings’, although he is seen off smartly, introduces a gendered aspect to the humiliations of sales-based employment.

For Angèle, however, work appears first and foremost a refuge from the unwelcoming winter cityscape, thanks to Marshall’s carefully constructed *mise-en-scène*. The credit sequence’s neon pink writing against a black background, set to a mournfully twanging guitar, anticipates the contrast between the artificial lights of the salon’s feminised space, where customers take a pause for themselves and undergo ‘magical’ transformations, and the cold, gleaming surfaces of sombre Parisian streets and public places glimpsed fleetingly, in low-key lighting that leaves patches of blackness and often also filmed out of focus, suggesting an unknowable world only distantly related to Angèle. This sense of the faintly menacing otherness of the city is conveyed by the film’s opening scene, which shows Angèle silently tidying up the salon for the night amid the space’s trademark reassuring warm glow, still to the credit music and through the glass of the salon front, which is framed by a darkness threatening to encroach from all sides. As she finally turns off the lights to leave a cold blue hue, a biting violin joins the score at the same moment that the growling sounds and ugly forms of traffic invade the soundtrack and the foreground respectively. The way in which Angèle is then immediately whisked off on a bus speaks of the mobility associated with city life, just as the fact that she meets her main love interest, Antoine (Samuel Le Bihan), in one of the two train stations which feature in the film makes it a precursor to the trend for amorous encounters in anonymous public places charted in this Chapter. Although religion does not feature

in this narrative, it is also noteworthy that its only outdoor scene outside the metropolis takes place next to the church in Poitiers, following the Christmas Eve mass. Here in her home-town, Angèle, who has just been disabusing her aunts of their belief that she must ‘know people’ in Paris – ironically far from the truth of urban solitude – immediately bumps into an acquaintance from her youth who greets her warmly, despite her city-dweller’s reserve.

Vénus beauté also exemplifies the increased prominence of narratives about active female sexuality discussed in Chapter 3, in this case depicting promiscuity as an antidote to chronic loneliness. Thus Angèle offers up minute personal details to the first man she finds in a self-service restaurant who will listen, in implied exchange for the sex she then offers him. The cheapness of the act is underlined by her insistence that it take place in his car. Although Angèle professes to enjoy short-term flings, an early scene in which she pursues and insults a ‘conquest’ who wants no more to do with her, along with her own admissions about being wary of love thanks to the pain it has caused her, belie her bravado. The film, then, reverses only superficially the stereotype of the desperate woman. There is a parallel between the way in which the contours of Angèle’s face blur at the end of the anonymous *rencontre* sequence described, as they head for the stranger’s car, and her later description of herself beginning to fall for Antoine: ‘It was a blur. I let myself go.’ This fluidity of self recalls earlier statements about love and congress representing a loss of self through a return to a state approaching the wholeness of infancy. This interpretation casts forty-something Angèle not as world weary cynic and sexual predator but as lost little girl.

Like prescribing love as an antidote to solitude, references to a failed relationship with Angèle’s beloved ex Jacques, which lead her to write love off as

‘slavery’ and ‘pain’, belong firmly to the intimacy discourse. There is also a strong implication that Jacques cheated on her, contained in the repeated motif of jealousy conveyed by a buzzing which takes over the soundtrack to suggest Angèle’s disturbed mental state when she sees Antoine with other women; in her projection that he will cheat on her giving the excuse of his ‘freedom’; and in her allusions to being stood up, as well as, on one occasion, a splenetic outburst directed at an unanswered phone (‘I’m *sick* of answer machines!’). Not only that but Angèle’s relationship with Antoine is itself emphasised as being an adulterous one, in an anti-romantic mode which will not allow us to forget his jilted fiancée, driven so mad with grief that she finally tries to shoot him. This act picks up on the film’s repeated association of love with violence against other people, as well as with disfigurement: through both the facial deformity Angèle has given Jacques and also the skin graft Marie’s older lover tells her he received from his wife following an accident.

This last example simultaneously suggests a more positive side to conceptualising love as compromise of the ego. A similarly ambivalent value is attached to the film’s other, cosmetic masks, traded by the salon, which can represent duplicity in the sense of both deceit but also pleasurable show. More importantly for the present discussion, *Vénus Beauté* is aware, too, of the dual meaning of staging when it comes to romance. The highly romantic nature of Antoine’s intentions is conveyed the first time he appears from nowhere to address Angèle with a ‘one and only’ *coup de foudre* discourse about finding a needle in a haystack, which he claims ‘has nothing to do with one night stands or forming a couple’ – in other words, with everyday life. Normally confident Angèle’s mistrusting reaction of such an explicit statement of capricious romantic desire, naturally taking Antoine for a possibly dangerous lunatic from whom she is clearly anxious to separate herself, wrings

comedy from the disjunction between romance and realism, since from the latter perspective a truly romantic declaration from a stranger can only appear the unwelcome attentions of a potential stalker. Similarly, when Angèle does agree to grant Antoine a date, the film humorously subverts another rom-com cliché whereby feigning love becomes a means to achieve it, in a humorous sequence – anticipating a similar one in *Prête-moi ta main* – where she feigns coarseness by stuffing herself with garlic and drinking to the point of throwing up, in order to discourage her suitor, as she feels threatened by the force of the transcendent emotions he professes to feel for her.

Later in the film, however, Angèle gives way to the pleasurable side of the romantic fairy-tale proffered by Antoine. One key aspect of this fairy-tale is her suitor's extreme masculinity. Especially striking is a scene where Antoine comes to the salon and his muscular torso – rather than the usual fragmented feminine physique – is offered up as spectacle to the viewer, as a prelude to him fixing the lights that the flirtatious female employees apparently cannot reach, in a clear invocation of the archetype of the hunky handy-man. It is appropriate that this character from a romance narrative is an artist: in fact, a sculptor, whose current commission for a church altar furthers his association with past values. Antoine also insists, in new romantic style, on paying for Angèle, including on one occasion for a showy gold dress he selects for her – a detail which makes the link to the character of a 'kept woman' who comes into the salon complaining that her lover only buys her impractical clothes and treatments. In other words, Marshall makes fairly explicit the new romance's subtext of female subjugation to patriarchy in coupling as a kind of prostitution.

The film's ending, however, appears a paradigmatic example the new romance's tendency to offer the genre's codified conventions as 'picturesque museum pieces – to be admired but not believed' (Deleyto 2003: 181). Thus while the film's setting over the Yuletide period coincides with *La Bûche*, *Modern Love* and numerous global rom-coms in exploiting a special occasion to create a romantic atmosphere, with the salon's lights complemented by intermittent shots of Parisian Christmas lights (against oppressive grey skies), the final scene's New Year's Eve setting adds to this *dépaysement* by having Angèle don a fairy-tale princess outfit, for a fancy-dress party. Despite being preceded by a sequence showing Angèle at her lowest, convinced the relationship with Antoine will bring her nothing but pain, the ending offers us the classic rom-com climax of the lingering kiss, temporally elasticised by dissolves that uproot it from the flow of narrative context to suggest a transcendent moment. At the same time, adding to the distancing devices of the festive atmosphere and fancy-dress clothing are two further layers of physical displacement between the protagonists and the camera. The kiss returns us to a position of viewing, as at the start, through the glass window of the shop-front, this time complemented by a curtain of blue neon sparks from the light broken by the wayward gun-shot fired by Antoine's fiancée. These sparks, evoking climax and celebration, are the apotheosis of a leitmotiv that has spanned the film, insistently reminding the viewer of the power of smoke and mirrors. Thus if *Vénus beauté* seeks to provide us with a utopian image of the couple, suggesting that the meaning of desire is love, it does so only with a clear warning that such images are no more than pleasurable illusion.

CONCLUSION

French romantic comedy of the 1990s and 2000s can be seen from these analyses to engage with contemporary social issues that exceed the questions of gender more readily identifiable with the genre. Contrary to its popular conception as a genre that overlooks the darker side of humanity, then, the rom-com is far from immune to the anguishes associated with postmodernity's widely perceived status as a period defined by the scarcity of meaningful human connection. Rather, such an apprehension is key to the primordial status enjoyed by romance in Western culture today.

For this reason, numerous contemporary French rom-coms are informed by issues of loneliness and the search for meaning, conveyed at the levels of both theme and form. In tune with theorisations of post-industrial living arrangements, many of these films are set in urban spaces – and give considerable prominence to setting, often through a naturalistic style that is readily associable with socio-realism and its own conventionally gritty thematics. In this way they contrast with recent classically romantic portrayals of France's capital city in films designed for export such as *2 Days in Paris* (Julie Delpy, 2007) or *Midnight in Paris* (Allen, USA 2011). These 'realistic' depictions of city life are about more than targeting the urban audiences that make up the majority of cinema-goers in France as elsewhere. In such films, protagonists often embody an infantile aspect that splices a sense of the metropolis' unlimited possibilities with a dramatisation of its overwhelming hugeness and anonymity. Indeed, anonymous encounters become a staple of the genre, signalling the replacement of the old idea of the girl next door with the emblematic contemporary figure of the girl in the next door seat. In common with this latter statement, there is a gendered dimension to this schema, with female characters

notably often played by highly feminine and childlike actresses, conscripted as repositories for mankind's supposed fragility in today's hyper-modern world. Of course, these actresses' personae also represent a particularly unthreatening version of femininity, which can be seen as part of an impulse to offset the unsettling changes to women's status that have taken place in recent decades in the eyes of some viewers.

Recent French rom-coms reflect, too, the industrial and technological developments that have continued to accelerate into the twenty-first century. Professional dissatisfaction linked to nostalgia for more 'authentic' craft-based areas of work is a common theme, while women in particular are not generally portrayed as fulfilled by their careers, which often involve lowlier jobs than those occupied by men – as is to be expected from romance narratives. Additionally, the role of the internet and related phenomena in coupling recurs in rom-coms of the 2000s especially. This is in keeping with the increased social acceptability of internet dating. At the same time, a degree of suspicion of such practices and nostalgia for more vital forms of communication persist intermittently.

Nor are network structures limited to the virtual realm in these films, which intensify a global trend for multi-protagonist structures. This stems in part from the decline of the family and the increased emphasis on peer and other social groups as a source of human affirmation. Indeed many rom-coms depicting group dynamics present themselves as a reassuring response to social atomisation. In the case of mosaic films, though, the links between individuals are so loose, and their interconnections characterised by an aesthetic of collision so much more frequently than one of harmony, that this still relatively small group of films instead emphasises

fragmentation and the threat to love and other social relations posed by individualism.

If mosaic films evoke chaos, the felt absence of a grand scheme for human organisation is also occasionally in evidence at the metaphysical level in French rom-coms. As I have suggested, the rise of religion looks from the perspective of 2013 like a candidate for being a key trend in contemporary society, for reasons which surpass at the same time that they are inseparable from a wider malaise identifiable with postmodernity. A few recent films thus suggest a nascent impulse to seek meaning through racial and especially religious markers of identity and structures of meaning, while others reflect the increased pressure fortified religious allegiances may place on multi-ethnic France through depiction of mixed couples. However, such allegiances are understood socially rather than metaphysically. This is partly because metaphysical questioning remains more typically the preserve of drama than comedy, but also because it is in their everyday social manifestations that race and religion bear most immediately on coupling culture in a secular society.

The formative role of such narratives in dictating coupling behaviour is a precept of this study examined in the latter half of this chapter. Shaped by multiple discourses about coupling, the French rom-com in turn translates a heterogeneous plethora of perceptions about the role of the love relationship under late capitalism. Moreover, these are inflected in specifically national ways.

Most obviously for France, the adulterous tradition persists to an extent, although it has undoubtedly been complicated in rom-com by the rise of women – not least as directors – among those most likely to take a critical stance on male promiscuity but support female sexual adventurousness. Beyond this, with the sting of adultery compromised by the normalcy of divorce, a few recent films look to

more deviant forms of illicit behaviours and notably homosexual dalliances to endow narratives with shock value. However, this proves in itself a rather superficial form of transgression.

The increasing realism with which adultery is approached in today's rom-com (by contrast with classical adulterous farces) exemplifies the rise of the discourse of intimacy. This is associated with a pragmatic conception of love based on partnership that transcends the physical without overlooking it. Such a sensibility informs the very shift I have just described, whereby taboos around adultery appear in some films as obsolete as the sanctity of marriage, with relationships increasingly treated as equivalent whether inside or outside wedlock. It is worth, though, clarifying that the long-term, committed relationships that continue to provide the ostensible goal of romantic films do not so much depart from marriage as simply replace it under a new, and only occasionally overtly provisional, label – as Shumway (2003a: 231) notes, even intimacy still assumes the dyadic couple as the norm. Indeed, intimate constructions of love might best be described as pragmatic partnerships from within whose shelter the overwhelming realities of the twenty-first century can more easily be faced. I have also argued that French cinema is in many ways predisposed to embrace intimacy, thanks to its general preference for realistic, questioning modes, including through the favouring of ensemble narratives. The frequency of the rom-com *choral* alone in fact suggests an increased preference for intimacy over romance in the contemporary French genre in a way that contrasts with the global situation, where intimacy is the minor key to romance's major one today. The dominance by intimacy of the French rom-com landscape also supports my argument that French society is negotiating some issues, about the changing

nature of coupling relations in the face of women's greater emancipation and the decline of marriage, later than Anglophone cultures.

This intimacy discourse *is*, however, complemented by some films more obviously conceived along traditionally romantic lines. A film like *Prête-moi ta main*, predicated on on male unwillingness to commit but ending – via a deception scenario – in its couple's unquestioned happy union and indeed (adoptive) parenthood, can be seen to channel a conservative opposition to the discourse of intimacy. In most films such new romanticism is only one element, however, undermined not only by overt engagement with the complexities of intimacy alongside romantic elements, but also by many texts' self-proclaimed status as (meta-)fiction, as in the case of Thompson's films, or even more obviously in *Venus Beauté*. This feature of global new romances may have made the format more palatable in France, particularly with female directors negotiating the contradictions of postfeminist identities.

In these many and diverse ways, the rom-com enshrines the role of romance (in its everyday sense) in lending human existence meaning, at the same time that it reaffirms the love relationship's 'crisis' status. The genre can thus be seen now to alleviate and now to stimulate the cultural anxieties of postmodernity. As a whole, it addresses an audience that continues to place faith in love relationships between unrelated pairs of individuals at the same time as recognising this faith may well prove misguided.

CHAPTER 3

GENDERED IDENTITIES IN LOVE

In the previous chapter, discussing how recent developments in social organisation have influenced French rom-coms' imaginative rendering of coupling culture, my analyses inevitably incorporated questions of gender. In this one, this issue is the central object of scrutiny, as the structuring axis along which shifts in coupling culture work themselves out. Critically, while narratives about the 'right' love object and companion always involve gender, narratives about gender are by definition about more than the conventions for choosing a partner. As Judith Butler has famously argued, '[g]ender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time' (Butler 1999: 22). That is, gender is constantly being reinvented, through multifarious discourses, including popular films. To attempt to unpack some of the implications of how the contemporary French rom-com constructs gendered identities, the present chapter is organised into sections based on three major categories of these: femininity, masculinity and queer or alternative gender positions.

THE NEW 'NEW WOMAN'

Cinema has a long history of reacting to increased demands for female emancipation with nervous laughter – going back at least as far as Alice Guy's *Les Résultats du féminisme/The Consequences of Feminism* (1906). I have suggested, indeed, that such demands on the part of French women are a key factor in romantic comedy's

current proliferation in France. This is true in both a direct sense, through the rise of female directors in the genre, and a more contingent one, as directors of both genders use rom-com to take stock of and comment on the ways in which women's struggle for greater equality complicates relationship norms. In Chapter 2, I outlined one feminine archetype that has grown up as a backlash against female emancipation: the lonely and vulnerable urban single girl. The construction of this figure in several films is consonant with observations about representations of femininity in popular culture globally made by Negra, who alleges that, '[w]idely acknowledged as a neoconservative era, the 1990s and early 2000s have been characterised by heightened pressure to define women's lives in terms of romance and marriage' (Negra 2004: 2). Although she does not say so explicitly, references elsewhere in her article confirm that her comments apply in point of fact to the USA. Whether or not she is telling the whole story about that particular (trans)national mediascape, the situation is somewhat different in France, where, despite some backlash archetypes, the overall sense is less of a concerted anti-feminist response than of France as simply, in the words of journalist Dominique Méda (2008) on women's move into public life since the 1950s, a 'society [that] does not appear to have got the measure of [the] silent revolution'. Hence this chapter will explore a *variety* of comic new women to be found in the nation's cinema. Through this gallery of heroines, recent rom-coms certainly air fears about contemporary womanhood; but they also sometimes – almost always in films made by women – delight in the comic possibilities of her emancipation and its potential to subvert hierarchies. This section will therefore begin with a more detailed consideration of the faces of female insubordination towards patriarchy in rom-coms, principally those written or directed by women. I will then return to a more overall view of the genre, going beyond

considering female characters' personality traits and idiosyncrasies and examining what social anthropologists have referred to as the 'economics' of coupling. By this is meant, in recognition of the cultural dominance of myths of female beauty and youth, an analysis of how women's aesthetic 'value', alongside and intertwined with their professional worth and indeed spending power, is viewed by the genre.

Feminine rebellion

I. Unruly femmes

The heading for this subsection is borrowed from Rowe's seminal study of 'unruly' women in popular US film and television, who use disruptive tactics including spectacle to reclaim space for female interests and desire (Rowe 1995: 8).²³ While Rowe finds such figures requisitioning humour to transgressive ends in the personae of American comediennes like Mae West, screwball actress Katharine Hepburn and, more recently, Roseanne Barr, her work is openly indebted to Bakhtin's (1984 [1941]) theorisation of French Rabelaisian comedy. One instance of direct quotation from Bakhtin is his statement that: 'If on the high dramatic plane it is the son who kills and robs, it is the wife who plays this role on the plane of comic Gallic tradition' (1984: 243; Rowe 1995: 95). As recently as 2010, too, an audience study suggests that the theme of 'women rebelling' and/or strong female personalities are perceived as enduring features of French cinema as a whole today (for both French and British audiences) (Stigsdotter 2010: 177).

Rebellious heroines are plentiful in female-authored French rom-coms and several are particularly noteworthy thanks to the success or cultural prominence of

²³ Tarr and Rollet (2001: 166-9) also refer to this study as background to a discussion about the particularly transgressive potential comedy offers French women in the 1980s and 1990s.

the rom-coms in which they feature. The early precursor to the current cycle, *Romuald et Juliette*, sets the standard. Starring Daniel Auteuil and Firmine Richard, Serreau's fairy-tale unites an initially unscrupulous, bourgeois company director with an underprivileged, black cleaning lady and mother-of-five, following his framing by colleagues for insider trading. Richard is notable for her considerable physical bulk, aligning her with the subversive comic tradition of the female grotesque, as well as her feisty performance. A scene in which Juliette berates Romuald for his continued selfishness casts her as the guardian of moral authority, adding force to Romuald's ultimate reform. It is also significant that she opts to keep her job, and independence, after their union.

Subsequent examples of female characters who refuse to be kept in their metaphorical place, at least during the central section of the narrative, are provided by two films starring Juliette Binoche: *Un divan à New York* (1996) and *Décalage horaire* (2002). These productions develop a bubbly star persona for Binoche at odds with her international 'mask-like and distant' (Vincendeau 2000b: 250) image, in a way that relies on building her characters out of various signifiers of femininity – and sometimes (feminine) corporeality – run riot. In *Un Divan*, as Béatrice, this occurs through her association with nature (her aviary and the house plants that burgeon into a 'forest' under her care) and messy vitality (the stain she makes on a shirt); in *Décalage*, her character Rose's excesses include frankness and emotional openness, such as when she spontaneously cries in front of a television program in the presence of a man, Félix (Jean Reno) whom she barely knows, as well as through a healthy appetite and the perfume and cosmetic smells that drive Félix to distraction. These latter traits, and the notion of physical appetites in particular, also hark back to the grotesque carnival tradition. This association makes apparent the

connection, in turn, with a more recent (albeit more obscure) example: in *Où avais-je la tête?* (Nathalie Donnini, 2007), Agnès (Judith Rémy) participates in one of carnival's modern-day successors, a burlesque cabaret. Childlike in their enthusiasm but womanly in physique, these women eclipse the wan silhouette of the Tautous and de Frances of Chapter 2, coming closer to the 'combination of post-feminist sophistication, romantic aspirations, and embarrassing physicality that has become a regular convention of twenty-first century [Hollywood] rom-coms' (Deleyto 2011). 'Embarrassing' these excesses may be, but these narratives tend to align the viewer with their loveably excessive comic heroines, even though, at times, these positive portraits are infected with reactionary elements. Often – such as when she says psychoanalysis is 'beyond her grasp' (although this may be intended as an in-joke by feminist auteur Akerman about Freud's much paraded masculine bias in his work) – Béatrice seems not so much an *ingénue* as an *imbécile*; Rose's childlike lack of inhibition can also be linked to her position at the start of the narrative as a victim of abuse by a violent boyfriend and as a woman endowed with a job with low cultural status; and Agnès' self-proclaimed excessive promiscuity, despite earlier being a source of unapologetic amusement, leads to her falling pregnant by the 'wrong' man. Once again, even female directors' visions of new womanhood remain coloured by older prejudices.

A less physically embarrassing or 'kooky' variant of feminine unruliness is offered by the more naturalistic, wry persona of auteur writer-director and performer Agnès Jaoui. In such films as *Un air de famille/Family Resemblances* (Cédric Klapisch, 1996, co-written with Jaoui), *On connaît la chanson* (Resnais, co-written with Jaoui) and *Le Goût des autres* (Jaoui), time and again the characters played by the filmmaker are a law unto themselves. In *Un air*, as Betty, she irritates her

backward family by indulging in the ‘unfeminine’ activities of smoking, drinking and riding a motorbike, representing for Geneviève Sellier (1998: 122) an example of contemporary gender non-differentiation in behaviour and dress. In *On connaît*, her character Camille is a ‘frumpy’ and reclusive historian who has just completed a thesis on a topic whose obscurity provides a running joke, and who apparently cares little for others’ opinion. In *Le Goût*, meanwhile, Manie is, like Betty, a tough, independent woman, who engages in two traditionally masculine activities: managing a bar and – in defiance of the Law – selling cannabis. Her relationship with macho bodyguard Moreno (Gérard Lanvin) crystallises many of the conflicts faced by the postfeminist woman. She is physically attracted to Moreno’s unapologetic Latin masculinity – the film’s title in fact comments on the inherent conventionality of taste as a cultural construct based on inherited ideas – but she cannot accept his disapproval of and attempts to curtail her lifestyle. The only way they can get along is through either sex or semi-ironic role-playing, as Manie goes from one moment playfully suggesting Moreno become a house-husband to the next herself assuming an uxorial role as she offers to cook him dinner. The fact that they joke about getting married in front of the mirror underlines the extent to which their negotiation of roles is a struggle to understand their own identities within their couple formation. This narrative thread is left unresolved as Manie watches passively, if a little ruefully, as Moreno finally leaves her house to go his own way, at least for now. Although I will argue in discussing female professionalism in rom-coms that Jaoui’s next film, *Parlez-moi de la pluie/Let’s Talk About the Rain* (2008), takes a small step away from imagining female experience in autonomous fullness without heterosexual love, her persona is all the same an example of feminist rebellion amid a sea of traditional and often less complex representations. Moreover,

it complements the more excessive, occasionally grotesque unruly variants of Binoche and Rémy with a version of feminism that is both more intelligent and more reconcilable with spectators' lived reality.

II. Female Desire

In common with, but more subtly than, Agnès of *Où avais-je la tête*, the character of Manie in *Le Goût des autres* addresses the specific question of female libido. While no longer new or shocking, cinematic representations of this issue have a sufficiently short and patchy history for the question to warrant detailed attention here, in a genre that has itself elicited divided responses about the centrality or marginalisation of sexuality (see Deleyto 2011). As Deleyto concludes, however graphically or otherwise sex is presented it is in fact at the core of romantic comedy. Since the 1960s, this has extended at times to sustained representations of active female desire. In contemporary France, such a move dovetails with exploration of the same theme in recent French auteur and especially so-called extreme cinema, for example in the work of Catherine Breillat and Virginie Despentes.

Films featuring 'the single but sexually active "Cosmo girl" of popular culture' (Handyside 2007: 221) are reasonably common in the French rom-com. A prominent example released roughly in the middle of the period of study is the aptly named *La Nouvelle Ève/The New Eve* (1999), directed by well-established auteur Catherine Corsini. Here promiscuous, sexually experimental Camille (Karin Viard, in an energetic performance prompting comparison with Katharine Hepburn [Anon 1999]), appears as a figure both of liberation and of sleazy egotism. An early scene appears to criticise 'conventional' relationships as based on the patriarchal coercion of woman into a position of constraint through the denial of education, when

Camille's married brother reveals that he prefers to keep his wife ignorant about contraception. By contrast, Camille is independent and dynamic; she seduces men for her own pleasure. On the other hand, a scene in which she refuses the gift of a sex toy from her ardent lover Ben in order to avoid obligation to him, sounds a parodic note, bringing to mind a marriage proposal or comparable offer of symbolic commitment. Replacing wedding rings with cock rings and dildos is humorous but the implied contrast also underlines the squalidly hedonistic, empty dimension of this exchange. Camille's alleged interest in socialism proves equally vacuous, apparently nothing more than a pretext for spending time with a (married) man to whom she is attracted. Her, at times, rather destructive obsession with the latter moreover suggests a desire for intense involvement as opposed to casual sex and thus conveys her dissatisfaction with her life of drink, drugs, meaningless sex and depressing mornings after. Despite Camille's unruliness, Vincendeau (2000a) therefore rightly pinpoints the film's embrace of a conventional Bridget Jones ideal – directly contrasting with Rollet's (2008: 96) reading of a subversion of the same model. The text ultimately adopts a position of pseudo-Christian morality and reproduces this religion's drive to imprison women in the strictures of a double standard that casts them as sinning 'Eves' who must be hidden away from public life and the freedoms enjoyed by men, at a time when these are available to them.

Two years later, *Reines d'un jour* also features Viard, amongst an ensemble cast, in a not dissimilar role. Here she plays Hortense, who is married but acts as if she were single, hell-bent on multiple affairs, seemingly to offset her insecurities about whether she is still attractive – a common theme in films by women, on which I shall say more shortly. Here unruliness manifests itself as mania, telephoning men repeatedly and throwing herself at them, and becomes indistinguishable from

neediness. Such traits align Viard's character in this film with hysterical female lovers in contemporaneous dramas by women *Post coïtum, animal triste/After Sex* (Brigitte Roüan, 1997) and *Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi/Beware of my Love* (Jeanne Labrune, 2002). Hortense's unhappy trajectory is also complemented by the fate of a more central character, impecunious singleton Marie, for whom a moment of reckless passion (with a groom at his own wedding) results in unplanned pregnancy. Vernoux's film thus privileges the negative aspects and repercussions of sexual openness by women, questioning the extent to which such behaviour is liberating as opposed to merely playing into the hands of the philandering male, for whom meaningless sex cannot have the same consequences.

Even in these films by women, then, promiscuity leads to emotional emptiness, if not mental unbalance, and may be punishable by unwanted pregnancy (or even, in retro male-authored *Clara et moi*, through contracting HIV). This can certainly be read in terms of a fearful backlash against increased liberty that has taken hold of French women from within, taking a rather *passé* form that nonetheless resounds with the force of ages in traditionally Catholic France. However, this is not the full picture. A key champion of female desire without punishment is auteur comedienne Josiane Balasko, a French female star originally from the Splendid *café théâtre* troupe, whose persona has also been compared to Rowe's unruly woman (see Tarr with Rollet: 185-6). The films of playwright, actress and director Balasko, the most popular French director after Claude Lelouch in the mid-1990s (Vincendeau 1996: 24), are frequently but not exclusively vehicles for Balasko's larger-than-life characters. Nowhere is this persona's disruptive status more obvious than in the opening credit sequence of *Gazon maudit/French Twist* (France 1995). Here the van belonging to Balasko's character Marijo passes through a tunnel, appropriating the

now standard visual metaphor for *male* penetration, to what Waldron (2001: 69) has rightly described as a gentle, ‘feminine’ landscape of blissful peace, evoked by Procul Harem’s ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ on the soundtrack. At the same time, this long shot evokes proleptically lesbian Marijo’s attraction to married Loli (Victoria Abril) and her consequent penetration and detonation of the bourgeois family, and the chauvinistic values of southern France, in favour of women claiming pleasure for themselves.

Because of its dramatisation of homosexuality, I will discuss *Gazon maudit* further in the final section of this chapter. More recently, though, Balasko has explored heterosexual female desire in a non-judgemental way. In *Cliente* (2008), she casts Nathalie Baye as the desiring – and, more unusually, older (Baye was a very youthful 60 in 2008) – heroine, Irène, through the tale of a divorcee who pays for sex from ‘escorts’. Relevant here is the well-documented and widely publicised struggle Balasko had in raising finance for a narrative that attempts to lift some of the taboos around mature female desire, despite her star status (she plays a secondary role). Significantly, escort Marco (Eric Caravaca, then aged 42) describes sex with Irène as ‘pure pleasure’, while it is implied, such as through a sequence intercutting between Marco’s parallel relationships with his wife and with Judith, that their climactic break-up is precipitated by their becoming too attached to one another. On the other hand, enriched by the intertext with *Vénus Beauté*’s vision of Baye amid urban solitude, a penultimate scene in which Judith reacts to Marco’s departure by dissolving into anguished tears subscribes to the conventional view that women find it more difficult than men to separate sexual and emotional desire.

Balasko’s reluctance to punish female desire is inseparable from her sociohistorical background, as an actress born in 1950, who shared her youth with

that of the 1970s feminist generation for whom sexual openness was to be prized. However, *Vénus Beauté* director Tonie Marshall forms part of the same generation, yet her work is considerably more ambivalent on the same question (see Chapter 1 case study), and Corsini (who directed *La Nouvelle Ève*) is only 6 years younger. In *Cliente*, Balasko, moreover, seems to distance herself from unequivocally straightforward endorsements of female sexual freedom (although her book on which the film is based is clearer about the positive value of such freedom). In general, there is a decline in narratives about female desire in the 2000s. This may be partly attributable to the genre's increasing globalisation – via American 'prudery', especially in the new romance – and also, as I will argue in the next major section of this chapter, masculinisation. It represents in any case an unwelcome edging out of space in which femininity may exist unbound in all its facets.

III. Female friendship

The masculinisation of the global rom-com in the 2000s has been acknowledged within both academia and popular culture, through terms like 'homme-com' (Jeffers McDonald 2009) and the increasingly common 'bromance' (see Patterson 2008). I will argue in the next section that a similar progression is perceptible in the French romantic comedy. In light of this, it is important to highlight a modicum of feminine retaliation to the development, in rom-coms that privilege female friendship.

Female friendship provides a secondary plot to the central romance in *Laisse tes mains*, a film whose debt to Pedro Almodóvar is visible in its celebration of wacky femininity (through a group of friends who regularly gather to get drunk and dance wildly to the hit Adamo song that lends the film its title), as well as in the casting of the Spanish director's erstwhile 'muse' Rossy de Palma. However, Karen

Hollinger (1998: 238) has critiqued a dominant model in American female friendship films, involving an identificatory system in which women's shared experience of social constraints makes them appear inevitable or even rewarding. There is something of this system at work here, as for example one friend enjoys complaining about having to cook dinner for her family before being allowed out with her girlfriends. Furthermore, even seemingly self-sufficient, extrovert international businesswoman Myriam (de Palma) is overtaken by loneliness following a failed internet date.

The rom-com that depicts female friendship on a roughly equal footing with romance in a mode most akin to everyday reality is *Tout pour plaire/Thirty-Five Something* (Cécile Telerman, 2005). This film picks up on a shift noted in the (already relatively recently consolidated) genre of the female friendship film identified by Hollinger, from dyadic to group films, where three or more female characters embody different life choices, as also prominent in global television series such as *The Golden Girls*, *Desperate Housewives* and (also on film) *Sex and the City*, points of contact with the latter being much remarked upon by critics. As in *Laisse tes mains*, the friendship group in *Tout pour plaire* comprising Marie (Judith Godrèche), Juliette (Mathilde Seigner) and Florence (Anne Parillaud) offers a forum for telling bitter truths about the imperfections of each character's romantic situation – as well as for letting the decorous feminine mask slip, as when the women dance to classic feminist anthem 'I will survive' by Gloria Gaynor, decrying men and, in the case of newly separated former model wife Florence, swigging wine from the bottle. The fact that Florence actually leaves the husband who has abandoned all childcare duties and become emotionally distant makes this a more rebellious text than *Laisse tes mains*. So does the fact that she simultaneously quits her advertising job working

for a despotic male boss, as well as ultimately rejecting romance in favour of sorority by standing up a date to spend time with her friends. For this reason the usual closing rom-com image of heterosexual union is strikingly ousted by a vision of the three friends.²⁴

Regarding the other two protagonists, while Godrèche's Marie is a successful doctor who does rebel against her layabout artist husband to the extent of forcing him to increase his contribution to the household budget (although not domestic duties), it is in single lawyer Seigner's Juliette that Telerman offers perhaps the most complex vision of modern empowered femininity, no doubt partially based on her own experiences as a media lawyer. As I also argue in reference to her construction as a mother in *Une semaine sur deux (et la moitié des vacances scolaires)* (Ivan Calbérac, 2009) (see Chapter 4), Seigner, who is square-jawed and solidly built, but toned and generally well turned out with luscious long hair and piercingly blue eyes, often plays feisty women who combine 'feminine' traits, including female desires, with relatively 'masculine' features: women who, as one review of *Tout pour plaire* puts it, search for happiness while refusing to be a doormat (Carrière 2003). Not only is Juliette a formidable businesswoman who learns in the film to manage a corporate (i.e. patriarchal) client who has been trying to take advantage of her status as a lone (female) lawyer to postpone paying her, she also performs other traditionally masculine tasks, such as scooping up a drill following the departure of a flaky ex. Here she looks a far cry from either the embarrassing physicality Deleyto associates with contemporary Hollywood rom-com heroines, or any kind of stereotype of 'ditziness', as she sets about taking charge of the DIY in her new apartment herself

²⁴ A comparable move is effected by the resolutions of *Toutes les filles sont folles* and *Cliente*, with pairs of sisters, and in *LOL* and *Une semaine sur deux* with mother-daughter duos.

with a confident, aggressive stance. Although she does end up in a nascent relationship with her bank manager, this is symbolically only after achieving financial independence and he is forced to accept the privileging of Juliette's friendships, when Florence interrupts their first date in need of moral support.

However, at times Juliette does blame herself for her ex's departure – when in fact his characterisation as an eternal student encodes an inability to see anything through – and she is on many occasions troubled by fears of her lack of appeal to men. This reflects some of the real difficulties that successful and extrovert women may face when it comes to heterosexual courtship – according to one of Juliette's dates, 'women today demand a lot'.²⁵ One of the areas about which Juliette of *Tout pour plaire* is wracked by insecurities is her physical appearance, a topic also referenced by the film's title. Literally translated as 'everything to please', this phrase refers to the efforts made by women to keep men happy (although the fact that it is frequently used ironically in common parlance underlines the film's subversive stance on female subordination). Such anguish seems particularly unjust in the case of a character like Juliette who is a high achiever in so many other arenas, over which she has more control. This is an appropriate place to begin considering explicitly the economics of looks and partner 'worth' that underlie the game of courting in romantic comedy and beyond.

²⁵ It is instructive to observe some of the self-confessed parallels between Juliette and Seigner herself. An article on the actress that appeared in *France-soir* following the release of *Tout pour plaire* focuses on her search to find a man. In interview with journalist Richard Gianorio, Seigner pronounces herself too frank and suggests that she has as yet failed to find a partner with whom she can really laugh (Gianorio 2003).

Sexual and Other Economies

According to anthropologist Kingsley Davies (1941: 376): ‘A cardinal principle of every stratified social order is that the majority of those marrying shall marry equals.’ However, this ‘equality’ is often measured on value scales that differ for each member of the couple, in a pattern that more often than not tracks gender difference. Specifically, women have traditionally been prized for their looks in a way that does not apply to the same extent to their male counterparts even today. Stacey summarises the situation with regard to contemporary global culture and cinema acutely, arguing that while the increasing commodification of masculinity today extends to cinema – reflected by illustrations of the potent possibilities of the male body on screen as object of an erotic gaze by such theorists as Richard Dyer, Steve Neale and Miriam Hansen (as well as Tasker [1993]) – a chasm remains between ‘the discursive inscriptions of femininity and of masculinity’. Unlike with feminine ideals, physical appearance is for constructions of masculinity merely one in a list of possible ideal features and not the most important one (Stacey 1994: 225).

The ways in which the myth of feminine beauty oppresses women have been discussed by such cultural theorists as Sandra Lee Bartky (1982) and Naomi Wolf (1991), in the latter case in a polemical bestseller that brought its author a degree of international celebrity. The issue is not only the one-dimensionality – and glaring injustice – of physical appearance as a criterion for judging people. As Wolf (1991: 59) rightly points out: ‘A beautiful heroine is a contradiction in terms, since heroism is about individuality, interesting and ever-changing, while “beauty” is generic, boring and inert.’

The cultural hold of the myth of feminine beauty is in evidence at every turn in France – one only has to think of the fact that the models for *Marianne*, a national

symbol of the Republic, have included such world-renowned beauties as the actresses/models Brigitte Bardot, Catherine Deneuve and Laetitia Casta. Not only that but France has a particular history of cultivating female *seduction* specifically (see Bard 1999b: 31-2). Femininity's frequent congruence with both the aesthetic and the erotic in France is in fact surely a factor in many female directors' choice to publicly deny the importance of gender to their work – even when that work betrays a feminist bent, as notoriously with Akerman, Kurys and Balasko (all of whom have directed rom-coms later in their careers), amongst others. In any case, as we will see, the rom-com reflects and contributes substantially to the tradition of idolising the female body, as opposed to females' achievements, notably in the world of work.

The tensions between femininity and professionalism are further complicated by the issue of wealth. Cinderella narratives, pairing beautiful women with rich men, are an archetype of Western culture. They are also flourishing in global romantic comedies of recent decades, from *Pretty Woman* to *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, USA 2002) or *Music and Lyrics* (Marc Lawrence, USA 2007), where low status women are 'rescued' from their jobs by powerful patriarchs. It is important to note here that pairings of lower-income or lower-class women with affluent men represent only a minimal deviation from the resolutely middle-class setting of romantic comedies. This feature of the genre reflects the historical fact that it is this privileged class that in fact leads changes in intimate culture (cf. Shumway 2003a: 7). This is largely because such changes have been driven principally by women's acquisition of power, which is considerably greater for those who can afford such luxuries as, for example, childcare than is the case for their less moneyed sisters. In other words, the 'economy' of rom-com is a fairly elite one. In this, the genre mirrors

feminist movements themselves, in France even more than in Anglophone nations (see Duchén 1986: 148).

In this section I will argue that double standards about gendered appearance and seductiveness are the norm in French romantic comedy and that the beauty myth, alongside its close cousin the cult of youth, is both a structuring framework and at times an overt theme. Bearing in mind the paradigm of commodity exchange set up in this introduction, this will lead in turn to a consideration of how women's work is constructed across the genre as a whole, interrogating the extent to which women's 'value' as a coupling prospect has been updated in the postfeminist era.

1. Seductresses - and clowns

In focusing on disparities in the presentation of male and female characters in relation to the aforementioned cultural notions about what makes men and women attractive, it is important to bear in mind that the question of what is seductive depends on a number of filmic (and pro-filmic) elements. These comprise, in the first place, quite simply the physical appearance of actors and, in the second, how their characters are constructed, through performance style, *mise-en-scène* and cinematography.

Beginning with the issue of actors' looks, although my discussion of *Romuald et Juliette* highlighted Firmine Richard's departure from today's conventional norms of physical attractiveness (including, crucially, slimness), in contemporary French romantic comedy in general – as in cinema as a whole – the myth of feminine beauty is still generally in force or at best tentatively questioned. As in so many aspects of her fictional trajectories, contradiction thus characterises the status of the typical rom-com heroine, both endowed with a degree of

subjectivity within the narrative – indeed often as much or more than her male counterpart – and struggling with the negotiation of her place in society, but at the same time neither ordinary nor average when it comes to her powers of attraction, as a list of the actresses who embody such heroines illustrates. Salient examples include Juliette Binoche, Audrey Tautou, Cécile de France, Emmanuelle Béart, Carole Bouquet, Fanny Ardant, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Sophie Marceau, among many others. The fact that such actresses’ ‘extra-curricular’ work has very often involved modelling for the same corporations that are the architects and guardians of the myth of seductive femininity is also important. Although there is no French equivalent to the significant strand of Hollywood ‘shopping’ rom-coms, including *Pretty Woman* (see Brunsdon 2000), that unapologetically celebrate female consumerism, the same age-old alliance of capitalism and sexism (see Hennessy and Ingraham 1997: 68, citing feminist Barabara Ehrenreich as early as 1976) is more insidiously at work in such actresses’ part in naturalising women’s desire to look good.²⁶ This underscores the problematic status of their success and celebrity for feminism. Needless to say, fabulous (and often skimpy) dresses are still very often part of the spectatorial pleasure offered by the French rom-coms themselves, too, with texts conscripting wealth in the service of seduction. This is particularly obvious in those set in luxurious milieus like *Hors de prix*, *Quatre étoiles* or *L’Arnacoeur* (see also Chapter 5 case study), all set on the Côte d’Azur, notwithstanding all three films’ overt final rejection of opulence.

As might be expected, the men who play opposite these leading ladies vary in their conformity to received standards of attractiveness, as does the degree to which the costumes, narrative and in particular cinematography objectify them by

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See also Radner (1993) on *Pretty Woman*’s staging of the contradictions of postfeminism.

comparison with the actresses playing against them. Comic stars like Jean Reno (*Décalage horaire*, playing opposite Binoche), Alain Chabat (in *Gazon maudit*, opposite the pertly pretty Victoria Abril, and in *Prête-moi ta main*, opposite Gainsbourg) and Michel Blanc (in *Embrassez qui vous voudrez*, opposite Carole Bouquet, and *Je vous trouve très beau*, opposite attractive and much younger Romanian actress Medeea Marinescu) and others not only incorporate some physical features tending towards the grotesque (for instance Reno's and Chabat's prominent noses or Blanc's shortness); in rom-coms their performances actually underline physical imperfection and awkwardness. In *Gazon maudit*, Chabat's Laurent is catapulted into ungainly farce mode, leaving Balasko's lesbian Marijo to supplant him in the role of the gallant romantic hero. In *Prête-moi ta main*, a montage sequence ridicules his character Luis as he is poured into over-the-top bondage gear, posing in a subservient position with the sinuous Gainsbourg [Figure 8]. In *Embrassez*, the significant height difference between statuesque Bouquet and diminutive Blanc is only the most obvious in a list of features contributing to the asymmetry between her as classical beauty and him as bald clown. A manic performance style à la Woody Allen, interspersing nervous chatter and paranoid speculation with the frenetic and farcical capers dictated by the plot, further stresses Blanc's character Jean-Pierre's physical gaucheness.



Figure 8: A figure of fun: Alain Chabat in *Prête-moi ta main*

By contrast, female leads less often partake of this comic presentational mode and are more likely to be made static objects of desire. A clear example is Yvan Attal's autobiographical debut feature, *Ma femme est une actrice*, starring himself (another fairly short actor with irregular features, but also 'sexy' brooding dark eyes and floppy hair) opposite his real life partner Charlotte Gainsbourg and told in the main from his point of view, including through wry voiceover. The first shot of this film about the anxieties of an ordinary man married to a glamorous star heralds the camera's fetishistic stance towards its female protagonist, by lingering over a silent, smoking Gainsbourg, viewed from a three-quarter rear angle to show off her strong jaw line and distinctive profile [Figure 9]. Several reviewers commented on Gainsbourg's beauty in this film and one critiqued it for making of this talented actress an 'inanimate cypher' (Harris 2002). From the same year, another debut by an actor, Richard Berry's *L'Art (délicat) de la séduction*, covers similar ground in a more vulgar register. Verging on a seemingly inadvertent parody of the drive to sexually objectify women, the film follows car designer and confirmed bachelor Etienne (Patrick Timsit) in his struggle to seduce the alluring Laure (Cécile de France). During the main body of the narrative, Laure is difficult to see as a

character with any life of her own at all. After their first meeting, she toys with Etienne, promising him sex in several months' time and in the meantime meeting him only in public places to plan the big event, for which she says she wishes to be an object. Playing opposite the short and wholly physically unremarkable Timsit – whose character Laure at one point informs that men do not have to be as physically in shape as do women – de France is insistently fetishised, notably through cutaway shots of her long legs sheathed in mini-skirts. In one scene, when the promised congress is drawing near and Etienne's frustration palpable, she sits provocatively astride a phallic column talking to another man [Figure 10].



Figures 9 and 10: Fetishistic views in *Ma femme est une actrice* and *L'Art (délicat)*

Of course there are exceptions to this necessarily schematic overview; however these tend to deviate from the most conventional dyadic rom-com narrative structure. The preeminent example of female ‘clown’ is Balasko, whose short, sturdy physique does not conform to ideals of feminine beauty. In *Ma vie est un enfer/My Life is Hell* (1991), her portrayal of Leah, a secretary made so unhappy by her plain appearance that she sells her soul to the devil, uses humour to criticise the beauty myth. Thus Leah’s lascivious boss Xavier (the handsome Richard Berry), representing the pinnacle of sexism, is punished in a striking scene also remarked on by Tarr with Rollet (2001: 186) in which Leah, having lured him into sex by appearing in a Barbie-like body, grows a penis and rapes him. Another candidate is auteur comedienne Valérie Lemercier, whose unglamorous roles and highly mannered performance style, including fast speech and clumsy movements, generally downplay feminine allure (cf. Tarr with Rollet 2001: 189-92). Exemplary are her farcical rom-com *Palais royal!*, where she plays a rebellious French Princess Diana, and the satirical *Agathe Cléry* (Étienne Chatiliez, 2008), where she ‘blacks up’ to make a point about racism. Finally, less comical but equally far removed from beauty conventions is the persona developed by the voluptuous Yolande Moreau in *Quand la mer monte* (2004). This film is daring in mobilising a highly romantic (less humorous) discourse to describe the experience of a female protagonist whose age and physiology might once have consigned her to a comic older spinster/shrew role. Particularly remarkable is a lyrical scene in which her character Irène makes love and her ‘imperfect’ breasts are bedecked with a garland of flowers. That is, the film finds beauty in a lived-in female body. But here again fantasy is signalled, by her puppet-maker lover’s occupation, in the realm of carnival, and by the film’s surrealist aesthetics, including distorted landscapes created using irregular length

lenses and intended to mimic the look of Ensor and other Flemish expressionists (Welcomme 2004). While Leah of *Ma vie est un enfer* ends up with a jovial demon from the Underworld played by Daniel Auteuil, Irène and Dries' relationship does not outlive the duration of her tour, emphasising the relationship's status as utopian interlude rather than viable paradigm for contemporary couples.

Equally, more classically 'good-looking' actors do feature in rom-com, from William Hurt (*Un divan à New York*) and Thierry Lhermitte (*Le Zèbre*) to younger candidates like Samuel Le Bihan (*Vénus Beauté*) and Gad Elmaleh (*Hors de prix*). Indeed, the latter film makes much of objectifying Elmaleh's Jean, in his role as gigolo to an older woman who, for example, buys him shirts to complement his strikingly blue eyes. On the other hand, this is a marked or unusual element in this film linked to one of its central comic threads: the idea of a man playing a part – i.e. paid sexual slave and trophy partner – that is traditionally feminine. Not only that but Jean's aestheticisation in some scenes does not stand in the way of mining his physical imperfections for comedy in others, notably when his benefactress buys him dumb bells to encourage her willow-framed beau to beef up. Jean regards his gift as a monkey might a mobile phone and uses the accessories only in an ostentatious, excessive fashion for his lover's benefit. This is much more typical of French comedy's general drive to disguise actors' good looks in order to promote humour, as also with Elmaleh as a transvestite in *Chouchou* (Merzak Allouache, 2003) or Jean Dujardin, who alongside appearances as one of the characters in melodramatic rom-com *Mariages!* has continued to deploy his comic persona with the high comedy of *Brice de Nice*, where he plays an air-headed surfer, and the spoof series *OSS117* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2005 and 2009), send-ups of an eponymous French

Bond-esque series from the 1960s which mock his polished appearance as an arrogant, unreconstructed macho spy.²⁷

As so often, there is some correlation between the gender of filmmakers and how male and female characters are presented. It is certainly not the case that female directors are above selling their films on actresses' beauty. Pertinent here is Stacey's (1994: 125) illustration of the close association between femininity and utopian images, including cinematic ones, and therefore of the way in which ideals embodied by stars may be even more important to female spectators. However, most female directors avoid fixing the female body as an object for admiration frozen in time in romantic comedy – unlike, say, in the female-directed films of the New Extremism, which tend to feature full frontal nudity and/or graphic sex. There is also, arguably, a difference between objectification and frank eroticisation, which is even less likely to feature in rom-coms by women, despite French cinema's generally relaxed attitude about explicit material. By way of contrast, there is no doubt that Laure of Richard Berry's *L'Art (délicat)* represents a sexual fantasy primarily addressed at men. As well as her legs, during the climactic sex scene of this film we are also shown much of the rest of her body, in the usual fragmented way that has been associated with Hollywood (although the inclusion of protracted medium close-ups of her breasts is more typical of French 'raunchiness', at least as far as rom-coms are concerned).

While it is in female auteur pieces by the likes of Balasko, Lemerrier and Moreau that I have argued ideals of feminine beauty in romance are most clearly rejected, another female-authored film, box office hit *Je vous trouve très beau*,

²⁷ As for Dujardin's Oscar-winning turn in *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011), this film mocks the good looks of a *matinée* idol as inert and empty.

warrants mention for a degree of self-awareness on the issue of looks as currency, although this is finally papered over. The narrative creates cringe-making comedy by making overt a system of sexual exchange that is generally latent, when Blanc's farmer Aymé buys a Romanian young woman, through an agency, to replace his wife following her sudden death. Aymé is portrayed as a misogynist, who asks only for a woman who is healthy enough to work the farm and knows how to use a washing machine. The financial aspect of the courtship is in the end minimised, by having Aymé – morally redeemed through love – symbolically free Elena with a gift of money he pretends she won herself on the horses. It is only when Elena later realises by chance what Aymé has done that she returns to him, convinced of his true feelings for her. Yet her own feelings are glossed over at best, along with the relationship's sexual dimension as a whole: during the central section of the narrative, Aymé twice refuses Elena's invitations to sleep with her. The second time, she makes the offering of her body on bended knee, underlining the uneven power dynamic between them; but he merely kisses her forehead in a chaste and fatherly way. Even for their final coming together, they embrace rather than kiss. This total desexualisation of the union obfuscates the typical realities of such arrangements. Female director Mergault does introduce a feminine perspective on Elena's experience as an economic migrant forced to leave behind a young daughter. This event is presented as tragic, when the daughter no longer recognises her mother on the telephone and through Elena's obvious distress on the issue. However, other aspects of the film bespeak backward misogyny, including the portrayal of three 'plain' middle-aged local spinsters as an irrelevant comic background noise. The nadir of the second act 'low' section comes when one of these characters attempts to

chat up Aymé: a mature woman approaching a man of her own age is here a source of (risible) horror indeed.

II. Age matters

The age difference in *Je vous trouve* exemplifies the persistence of the ‘incestuous’ model of French comedy, where older male stars historically partnered young women – another facet of inequality. The model is not the dominant one in the contemporary rom-com but it certainly remains a significant paradigm, in particularly extreme evidence, for instance, in the pairings of Jean-Hugues Anglade and Julia Maraval (26 years younger) in *Dis-moi oui* (Alexandre Arcady, 1995), Robert Hossein and Tautou (49 years younger) in *Vénus Beauté*, Thierry Lhermitte and Claire Keim (23 years younger) in *Le Roman de Lulu* and Gérard Darmon and Zoé Félix (29 years younger) in *Le Coeur des hommes/Frenchmen* (Marc Esposito, 2003).

To counter narratives like these, a number of rom-coms directed by women reverse the pattern, by matching up older women and younger men.²⁸ This chimes with the global visibility of the ‘cougar’ and may also be influenced by the growing sense in the Hollywood industry that, in contrast to earlier views on the matter, older women can be a profitable audience, exploited, for example, by the recent ‘older bird’ chick flicks of Nancy Meyers (2003; 2009)(see Tally 2008: 119; 127-9).²⁹ Examples of actresses who have reversed the incestuous paradigm in France include

²⁸ There are also a significant minority of French films pairing up older contemporaries, usually as part of the family ensemble rom-coms discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Examples include *Les Marmottes* and *Je vais te manquer*.

²⁹ For further analysis of the depiction of older heroines in recent Hollywood rom-coms see Jermyn (2011) and, in both global culture and specifically *Something's Gotta Give* (Meyers, USA 2003), Wearing (2007).

Chantal Lauby (in her late 40s) in *Laisse tes mains*, Carole Bouquet (aged 50) in *Si c'était lui*, Catherine Deneuve (56) in *Belle maman* and Nathalie Baye, who has had a second wave of success as an older romantic lead (she was 60 in 2008), in several films: *Vénus Beauté*, *Une vie à t'attendre* (Thierry Klifa, 2004), *Passe-passe/Off and Running* (Tonie Marshall, 2008), *Cliente* and *De vrais mensonges*. In the majority of these narratives, however, the usual economy of looks is 'compensated' by the heroines' superior economic status by comparison with their male partners: in *Laisse tes mains* middle-class actress Odile enjoys a liaison with a funfair worker, in *Si c'était lui* best-selling academic writer Hélène takes up with the down-and-out Valentin and in *Cliente*, most extremely of all, Baye's successful television executive Irène begins to fall for the penniless male escort whom she loves to treat to expensive nights out. Not only that, but the heroines in question all continue to conform to classical norms of female beauty, potentially endorsing the view that within this de-individualising, anti-romantic economy of exchange their 'worth' may be extended beyond the average lifespan of the woman 'on the market'.

It is pertinent to recall here, too, Susan Sontag's observation about Gallic culture: 'French conventions of sexual feeling make a quasi-official place for the woman between 35 and 45. Her role is to initiate an inexperienced or timid young man, after which she is, of course, replaced by a young girl...' (1997: 21). This appears to be the pattern in Blanc's *Embrassez qui vous voudrez*, where Elizabeth (Charlotte Rampling) enjoys a one-night-stand with a friend's teenaged son. At the time of the film's production in 2002 Rampling was 56, suggesting – like my earlier examples – how 50 and even 60 have today become 'the new 40'. It is significant that, rather than simply objectifying Elizabeth, this narrative is concerned with the benefits of the coupling for her, ushering in a renewed self-confidence and serenity

that allows her to look on with a beatific smile as her husband spends time with his lover. On the other hand, Rampling's star persona is associated with a certain reserve that is constructed as tantalising, a veil behind which sexual secrets lie (see Slater 2012). This is also true of Deneuve, with her impassive acting style and relatively immutable face (Austin 2003: 42). This actress has in fact visibly undergone plastic surgery – not to mention referring in interview to ageing as a 'problem' about which any woman who claims to be *insouciant* is lying (Anon 1994). Bouquet's persona, too, has been set up in male-authored texts as a vision of 'inaccessible' beauty, for example in Luis Buñuel's *Cet obscur objet du désir/That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) and Blier's *Trop belle pour toi/Too Beautiful For You* (1989). In *Embrassez*, an appalling act of violence by her character Lulu's husband Jean-Pierre, who attempts to penetrate the beautiful wife he never feels he can truly control with a bottle, similarly suggests blatant misogyny and in this case, specifically, fear of the empowered woman who can no longer be banished from cultural visibility.

However, this visibility is conditional, simultaneously and paradoxically, on keeping hidden from public view 'the grotesque, laughable, and fearful' signs of female ageing (Wearing 2007: 290). A contrast might be drawn between these actresses' mystique and the fate of an actress like Brigitte Bardot, whose eschewing of plastic surgery and therefore 'natural' ageing means she is cruelly mocked for her looks, in the British popular press and on the internet. Consequently, older actresses' reasonably strong presence in the French rom-com does not signal a modification of the importance placed on good looks; it is merely a symptom of a culture in which adherence to the beauty myth is demanded for longer, as borne out by soaring plastic surgery figures not only in France but globally.

An image from *Laisse tes mains* of a gym in which even women who look to be in their 70s sweat miserably makes this very point sardonically [Figure 11].³⁰ Indeed, the fear of female ageing is frequently found in rom-coms by women featuring older heroines – unlike those examples discussed above by men. However, most directly concerned with this theme is *Vénus Beauté* (see Chapter 2 case study). Here Baye's character Angèle is both sympathetic and occasionally pathetic in her attempts to stay young, such as when her boss suggests she has resisted promotion to try to remain forever 'one of the girls'.³¹ Typically for a female-directed 'older bird' rom-com, then, while the cult of youth is critiqued and women are presented as its victims, they are also recognised to be complicit in maintaining its stranglehold.



Figure 11: Enslaved to the beauty myth forever in *Laisse tes mains*

³⁰ For further discussion of this film's treatment of the theme of female ageing see Harrod (2012: 232-3).

³¹ It seems logical for her persona in *Cliente* nine years later to have progressed to verbally endorsing facelifts, Baye herself clearly having had 'work' on her physiognomy in the interim.

III. Working girls

While the preceding discussion made reference to a number of rom-coms whose older heroines enjoyed higher economic status than their partners, female characters' professional status in the genre as a whole represents a key topic in its own right. In fact, almost all the women in French rom-coms are employed – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that women made up 46% of the French work force in 2005.³² This group is dominated, moreover, by women between 25 and 49 (Méda 2008). In other words, settling down with a partner and even having children is no longer likely to keep French women at home. Discussing representations of working women in global rom-coms in recent years, Negra (2004: 3) has identified a thriving negative archetype 'stressing the need to school women to scale back their professionalism lest they lose their femininity', which she logically interprets in terms of male desire to protect men's dominance of capital flows. In Chapter 2, I outlined a similarly gendered dimension to the suspicion of post-industrial work discernible in the French rom-com, emblematically in the film *Irène*, where Cécile de France plays a discontented notary. Having failed to realise her dream of becoming a lawyer, the eponymous heroine finds her work for an unreasonable male boss unrewarding and her life empty without romance. *Tricheuse/So Woman!* [Jean-François Davy, 2009] offers an almost identical narrative about a female lawyer. Remarkably, *Les Échos*' review of *Irène* reinforces this pernicious model, revealing the difficulties women with demanding jobs may have reconciling work and their other needs, by affirming that the majority of single women in France belong in the top socio-professional category (Anon 2006).

³²

Figures sourced from INSEE France

http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?ref_id=EEC05 Accessed 8 January 2013.

However, as touched on briefly in the previous chapter, the most common tendency in the construction of women's work in the French rom-com is actually for the female characters to have medium to low status jobs, or else jobs – notably in the media – constructed as superfluous, that do not interfere with their romantic story arcs. Female workers' overall lower status in the genre conforms broadly to social reality. Claire Duchen (1994: 164) has described the way in which certain jobs became dominated by women, and thus denigrated, in post-war France. More recently, despite the high number of women workers there, wages were still 16.3% lower for French women than men.³³ Representative jobs for women in the rom-com include cleaner (*Romuald et Juliette, Ensemble c'est tout*), concierge (*Le Bison [et sa voisine Dorine]* [Isabelle Nanty, 2003]), beautician (*Vénus beauté, Décalage horaire*), hairdresser (*De vrais mensonges*), model (*Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite*), agony aunt (*Ma vie en l'air*), midwife (*Fauteuils d'orchestre*), waitress (*Amélie, Fauteuils d'orchestre*), care worker (*Mauvaise foi*), teacher (*Quatre étoiles, Mademoiselle Chambon*) and writer of lowbrow romantic *romans-photos* ('photo novels') (*Toi et moi*). The significant sub-trend for films featuring women in 'frivolous' media-related jobs includes *La Bûche*, *Au suivant!*, *Au secours, j'ai trente ans/Last Chance Saloon* (Marie-Anne Chazel, 2004), *Ce soir je dors chez toi*, *Tout pour plaire*, *Cliente* and, recently, *Un bonheur n'arrive jamais seul/Happiness Never Comes Alone* (James Huth, 2012). Additionally, actresses (and other types of performer) are also common, for instance in *Le Goût des autres*, *Ma Femme est une actrice*, *Le Roman de Lulu* and *Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches*. Since well over half of these films are directed by women (including actress-directors Jaoui and

³³ Figures sourced from INSEE France http://www.insee.fr/fr/publications-et-services/default.asp?page=dossiers_web/dev_durable/ecart_revenu_salaire_hommes_femmes.htm Accessed 8 January 2013.

Lauby for the films about actresses), there appears to be an autobiographical-narcissistic element to this tendency. This does not detract from the relevance of Lucy Fischer's (1989: 64) claim that actress characters are ubiquitous in Hollywood films as they emblematised the role-playing in which women are condemned to participate in a patriarchal system where their principal function is to please men. Similarly, Tasker's (1998) study of working girls in popular cinema suggests Hollywood frequently constructs women's work as sexual display – which in this case would obviously apply to the job of model and potentially to those of beautician and hairdresser, too.

If we wish to delve deeper into the social panic that informs the dual-pronged campaign to either portray women as unhappy in demanding jobs or to restrict them to lower status and less 'respectable' professions, *Ma Femme est une actrice* provides exceptionally revealing insight into male anxiety about the second sex's increased presence in the work space. In this film, director Attal's character, a sports journalist also called Yvan, is made insecure by the success of his film star wife Charlotte (Gainsbourg, Attal's real life partner), with obvious autobiographical resonances. This manifests itself in paranoid anxiety about her participation in love scenes, which reaches a climax at the comic moment when he visits her on set to find the entire crew naked (in an improbable act of solidarity with Charlotte, who has protested at doing a nude scene) and reacts by vomiting and fainting. Rarely has there been such a clear illustration of the argument that male discourses seeking to associate women's work with adulterous temptation displace real anxiety about the threat to their position of power in the world (see Leonard 2001: 110). It is equally difficult to disentangle the sexually-expressed spousal anxieties of Jean-Pierre of *Embrassez* (see pages 179-81) from his insecurities about the dwindling revenues of

his journalistic career by comparison with those brought in by his wife's job as a lawyer.

However, a few films dedicate a degree of narrative interest to women's careers, and related – often gendered – challenges. In discussing female friendship films I hinted at the friction between no-nonsense independent lawyer Juliette's professional and personal lives in *Tout pour plaire*. Elsewhere, issues raised around romantic heroines' employment are less central but more acutely female-specific. In *Fauteuils d'orchestre*, sex discrimination is overt in the *Bar des théâtres*' policy of hiring only men – although the fact that they make an exception for heroine Jessica brushes the issue under the carpet (and the hospitality industry is not the most obvious potential culprit for rejecting women). In *Au suivant!*, casting director Jo has to overlook the over-familiarity and wandering hands of a famous film director, who also abuses his position in order to seduce beautiful women. Dealing with the same problem, the background detail that Jessica of *Fauteuils* has been chased from her job as a midwife following unwelcome sexual harassment raises an issue that, according to Marie-Victoire Louis (1999), may be particularly grave for women in France, where in 1983 the number of cases reported was 33% higher than the European average.

The specific challenges of juggling a romantic relationship with the demands of a serious career also feature in rom-coms. In *Mauvaise foi*, for instance, Clara's (de France again) partner Ismaël is incandescent when she is made late for a meal with his (Muslim) relatives by her evidently highly worthwhile job as a care worker for the disabled. Interesting in itself, too, is the fact that, as in *Fauteuils*, de France's character works in healthcare but not as a high-status doctor. In fact, women make up well over one third of French doctors – a reality more closely reflected by female

doctors' contrasting presence in television (mini-)series including *Une femme en blanc* (1997) starring the high profile actress Sandrine Bonnaire or the less 'quality' popular soap *Sous le soleil* (1996-2008).³⁴

The balancing act of career and romance is one of the principal themes of Jaoui's latest comedy, *Parlez-moi de la pluie* (2008). Taking place during a family holiday, the film follows the efforts of budding filmmakers Michel and Karim, played by co-director Bacri and comic star Jamel Debbouze, to make a documentary about Jaoui's character Agathe, a well-known feminist now running for political office. Their interviews provide scope for the airing of contemporary concerns about women's difficulties carving out a space in certain spheres, with Agathe, for example, defending the need for positive discrimination for women in politics. The hostility faced by a female in a traditionally 'masculine' role is at the root of much of the film's comedy. A sequence in which the three protagonists are forced to take shelter in a rural farmhouse after a storm comments on the way in which identity-related challenges are multiplied for a woman who complements femininity with responsibility for public affairs, as one of their hosts sits with his eyes glued to her 'pretty little white arms' and another berates her for the problems of French farmers. Meanwhile Bacri's Michel, typically for the actor, represents the insidious, outwardly benign face of prejudice, describing a feminist to his son as 'a woman who demands a lot [...] who's always looking for problems – like your mother [my ex-wife]'. Agathe's job no doubt responds to the considerable press attention women's relatively recent move into positions of political power has attracted of late. Furthermore, the well-known cases of Ségolène Royal, who led the Socialist

³⁴

For international statistics on female doctors see

http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/lab_fem_doc-labor-female-doctors, accessed 22 June 2012.

Party to be narrowly defeated by Sarkozy in France's 2007 elections, and more recently Eva Joly, the 2012 Green party candidate whose first round results were disastrous, attest explicitly to the problems faced by women in male-dominated professions, given that both women made public allegations about the sexism (and in Joly's case ageism) faced even within their own parties.³⁵ In the end, the tensions provoked in Agathe's romantic relationship by her busy schedule appear resolved in favour of love, as she seeks out neglected boyfriend Antoine for a reconciliation. This film's stance therefore tallies with the broader move in feminism since the 1970s for finding a space in even highly successful women's lives to admit romantic relationships with men.

Even if work by definition takes second place in the rom-com's generic value scale, the normalisation of female professionalism across this body of contemporary texts is significant. It should however be noted that not only, as suggested earlier, are rom-coms a middle-class genre par excellence, but Alison Light (1984) has argued that the tendency to actually sublimate class issues has been a staple of the literary genre for centuries. A similar drive has been repeatedly remarked on in filmed rom-com (Schatz 1981: 155; King 2002: 55-6; Krutnik 2002: 142). Of the films examined in any depth in this section, only *Fauteuils d'orchestre* suggests its female lead must work to survive. By the close of the narrative, however, the accent is no longer on Jessica's professional development: rather, it is through association with a playboy that she looks set to be absorbed into the film's resolutely *haut bourgeois* Avenue Montaigne milieu. Moreover, the majority of rom-coms are even more disingenuous about women's need to engage in difficult and potentially unrewarding forms of

³⁵ Royal has since been somewhat recuperated as the 'woman behind the great man', i.e. in her 'proper place', following her former partner François Hollande's election as president in 2012.

labour, from *Je vous trouve*, with its downplaying of the realities of prostitution, to *Décalage horaire*, whose finale sees beautician Rose simply abandon a job in Mexico to be with wealthy Félix. After all, as I have indicated, work, and women's work in particular, can only have so much importance in a genre whose *raison d'être* is the union of the two sexes.

This section has argued that, in its negotiation of contemporary womanhood, the French rom-com is characterised by heterogeneity. A significant number of films offer 'liberated' views of women who refuse to be put down, counterbalancing another group of narratives' more conciliatory and conservative figures, who prioritise romance and attachment to men above other life goals. However, while female desire and friendship are both occasionally explored in the films of the corpus, it is fair to say that neither is a stock feature of the genre. This is in part the consequence of the tenacious cultural purchase of the myths of female beauty and seduction, which render women as competitors for largely male attention, in France especially, where by global standards the bar for men's adherence to current paradigms of attractiveness is relatively low compared to women's. Instead, men are often the locus of humour, as I will illustrate in more detail shortly. Even where female characters are constructed as humorous, they also tend to be beautiful, with Binoche providing a readily available example, as well as being more often constructed as primarily seductive. Neither is the diachronic picture suggestive of progress towards a more even balancing of the scales. The absence in the 2000s of a younger candidate to fill a similar space to that occupied in the 1990s by Josiane Balasko (and to a lesser extent Lemerrier, born in 1964), in other words a woman whose construction is emphasised through both *mise en scène* and also narrative

detail as funny *rather than* beautiful, is notable. Regarding actresses' age, there does seem to be considerable movement here in terms of the upper 'limits' for romantic heroines. However, this is a very limited form of progress, inasmuch as the shift leaves the beauty myth firmly intact and can in fact be seen only to demand women's subjugation to the tyranny of unrealistic ideals for longer. There is little sense of mature women eliciting love on the merits of age itself, in a way that is not necessarily sexual. On the other hand, the genre does at least allow some female directors to engage in humorous dialogue about the anxieties of ageing, which may provide comfort to female spectators and even go some small way towards objectifying the cult of youth itself as a myth.

Finally, one important area in which the rom-com very broadly appears to reflect reality is in its portrayal of women's work. By this I mean that female professionalism has become the norm – but it is often accorded only secondary importance, mirroring the realities of women's generally lower-status employment. Taken in parallel with instances where this realism does not apply – in the genre's over-representation of women in 'superfluous' middle-class professions – both high status women workers and the working class can be seen to be marginalised. The work done by the rom-com to sublimate class means that the classic criticisms made against many feminist movements globally, for being too middle-class, resonate with some force in this context.

At the same time, however, several films do explore to relatively greater degrees work-related challenges faced by women, as well as men's struggle to cope with female success. In other words, the genre does not always simply wish away the 'problem' of how women's desire to undertake paid employment can be catered for by economies that have traditionally relied on women as an unpaid domestic

workforce. Where romance narratives were once a convenient alibi for propaganda seeking to maintain this situation, today they *can* also be rerouted in the service of working out how to reconcile heterosexual partnerships with the professional goals of both members of the couple. Although it dates back to the 1960s, and is offset by the tendency to belittle their work, the normalcy of female professionalism – and on occasion the need to reconcile work and love – is still the newest feature of postfeminist womanhood on-screen in France on display in this genre.

MELODRAMATISED MASCULINITY

If both rebellious and regressive female characters in French romantic comedy can be seen as translating women's increasing demands for more equal role-division in social relations (the latter as backlash stereotypes produced by social panic), the impact of these demands on men is also a subject of negotiation by the genre. This section examines how the depiction of male characters in a spread of recent rom-coms explores man's need to adapt to women's new, relatively emancipated place in society.

An important critical paradigm for this analysis is the figure of the 'melodramatized male', postulated by Rowe as a counterpart to the unruly woman in Hollywood comedy and also featuring, classically, in films by Woody Allen, whose substantial influence on the French rom-com has already been in evidence in Chapter 2. In this, Rowe coincides with the view put forward throughout this thesis, that many films are informed by both comedy and melodrama. It is also useful to cite here a distinction between the two structures proposed by Deborah Thomas, for whom 'melodramatic characters are far more likely than comedic characters to experience the mood or "feel" of their world in ways that match viewers' experience

of it' (2000: 13). In other words, conceiving masculinity as 'melodramatized' rests on the suggestion that male characters are being offered as worthy of the audience's sympathy – at least to a degree, since they still exist within (romantic) comedy's intermittently more distanced, objectifying narrative mode. Specifically it will be suggested that the presentation of male romantic heroes attached to backward notions of gender roles frequently blends mockery with some sympathy and that the proportions in which these attitudes are discernible vary considerably, correlating at times with the gender of the director.

In accordance with the substantial genealogy of the Western perception of masculinity as in crisis, as Vincendeau has noted, 'the intense, suffering male hero has a long history in French culture and cinema', including such distinguished comic antecedents as Fernandel, de Funès, Bourvil and Depardieu (2000b: 223-30). Indeed, Mazdon (2000: 100) has argued that the crisis of masculinity is thematically more popular in French comedy as a whole than it is in Hollywood. In rom-com, the melodramatised male appears with such frequency across various strands of the genre as to have become a stock character. He is, however, a slippery figure. Just as Modleski (1991) and, in France, Christine Bard (1999a: 324-5) have associated the notion of the crisis of masculinity with anti-feminism, Rowe (1995: 193-7) is critical of the melodramatised male's appropriation of the traits traditionally associated with female suffering and his concomitant vilification of women. It is not hard to see how depicting men's position as worthy of sympathy takes the focus off the ongoing inequalities still confronting women. Some feminists have further suggested that male appropriation of 'feminine' characteristics – such as suffering – 'represent[s] an expansion of the concept of legitimate masculinity, and thus an extension of its power over women' (Chapman 1988: 247). However, analyses of Allen's attitude

towards male and female characters have been marked by division. Evans and Deleyto (1998: 22-3), by contrast with Rowe, and while they agree with Neale's (1992: 293-4) observation that it is woman who in Allen's universe usually has the most to learn, argue that the director's self-critique can avoid the straightforward scapegoating of women. Indeed, as the following discussion will illustrate, the manifestation of melodrama within comedy implies particular ambiguities.

Melodrama and Mockery

Although she does not say so explicitly, the examples Rowe cites locate the melodramatic elements of character construction on the whole in narrative and to some extent performative, as opposed to stylistic, details, the latter remaining consonant with an overall comic perspective. Context can make the suffering male ultimately as much a figure of fun, including mockery, as of tragedy. Several rom-coms limit themselves to the more superficial features of male melodrama, as a kind of garnish to comedy that 'mock[s] the masculinity that tragedy ennobles' (Rowe 1995: 103-4).

This is often the case with the work of those female directors discussed in the preceding section. As Tarr (2005: 157) has noted in a different context, Serreau, after heaping adversity and its attendant confusion on her male protagonists, redeems them. Generally in a broadly comic, and only gently mocking, mode, *Romuald* never portrays its hero with anything less than benignancy, with a degree of compassion for him facilitated by the narrative detail of his unjust framing by his colleagues and the casting of highly popular and 'respectable' actor Auteuil. In Balasko's films, too, unreconstructed male characters tend to be foci of contumely more than tragedy. I have argued that Chabat's Laurent of *Gazon maudit* suffers the ultimate humiliation

when wife Loli discovers his multiple affairs and his place in the homestead is threatened by her lesbian lover, sending him into paroxysms of frequently slapstick fury. An episode of theatrical weeping is undercut by his drunken inability to ride his bicycle, as well as the fact that the aim of his journey is to visit other women for sex. Having said that, Laurent's predicament is not only ridiculed. A scene in which he repents of his previous mistreatment of women and commiserates on life's disappointments with an ageing prostitute, an obvious maternal figure, introduces a melodramatic tone in earnest. It is this more sensitive side that allows him to be rehabilitated to form a happy trio with Loli and Marijo at the end of the film. In line with the physical unremarkability I have highlighted in rom-com actors in the last section, it is worth pointing out here that excessive handsomeness is ill-suited not only to comedy but also to melodrama (as opposed to tragedy). In these examples, the actors' 'ordinariness' contributes to the impression that their worst misdemeanours represent only everyday selfishness and thoughtlessness.

It is important to recognise here the extent to which a trajectory toward male enlightenment is a function of films' adherence to the rom-com convention of the happy ending, tallying with descriptions of the genre as a narrative of self-discovery (see Evans and Delyto 1998: 3-4). Indeed, similarly gently mocking attitudes towards troubled masculinity are discernible in two female-authored films analysed earlier that present male *bildungsroman* (or *bildungskino*) trajectories alongside unruly femininity, *Un divan à new York* and *Décalage horaire*. It would, however, be inaccurate to suggest that all female directors portray particular characters in one way and all male directors in another, as *Embrassez qui vous voudrez* illustrates. Director Michel Blanc here establishes a distance from his male characters at times even more critical than that of his female counterparts – although he combines this

with an in-depth exploration of male psychology. I have already argued that Blanc's character Jean-Pierre finds it difficult to handle his wife Lulu's (Bouquet) better looks and higher salary, despite her obvious devotion to him. This aspect of the character is enriched by the perennial association of the actor-director's star persona with incompetence, submission and failure, sexual or otherwise, notably in his roles with 1970s troupe *Le Splendid*, in *Les Bronzés/French Fried Vacation* (Patrice Chéreau, 1978) and its sequels and in *Tenue de soirée/Ménage* (Blier, 1986), where his character is seduced by Depardieu's macho stud in drag. This aspect of his persona partly accounts for explicit comparisons with Allen (for example Valens 2002). Crucially, it is Jean-Pierre's excesses that convey the director's critical distance. These are at first comical, as he capers round a hotel in pursuit of innocent strangers whom he imagines to be his wife's lovers. At the same time, his absurd behaviour is recuperated by details eliciting sympathy, such as patent adoration of his wife and explicitly aired insecurity. As the narrative progresses, however, increasingly his actions move beyond the pale. The climactic violent act of trying to force the bottle into Lulu's vagina exposes in no uncertain terms the misogyny at the core of his psychological difficulties, which finally see him institutionalised. No wonder numerous critics commented on the film's extreme tonal mixing.

More sympathetic is Blanc's portrayal of another melodramatised male, Jérôme (Denis Podalydès, usually seen in dramas): a harried husband whose financial woes prompt him to attempt suicide. The casting of Viard – whom I have identified elsewhere as a prominent embodiment of empowered contemporary femininity on screen – in the regressively misogynistic, stereotypical role of Jérôme's nagging, parasitic wife Véro suggests fear of 'new womanhood'. On the other hand, the film's scenes of sisterhood radiate an atmosphere of feminine vitality

reminiscent of Almodóvar. Véro's claim that men are more fragile than women in particular echoes the Spanish director, while it also belittles Jérôme's failed suicide attempt. So too does Elizabeth's observation that men make a performance of things ('font leur cinéma'), simultaneously suggesting the extent to which melodrama has become a key mode for social configurations of contemporary masculinity. Both of these charges are more traditionally levelled against women. The audience is primed to be receptive to Lulu's wistful observation, following one of Jean-Pierre's paranoid episodes, that women might be better off without men. On the other hand, the issue remains rhetorical, given the frequent focus of the women's conversation on romantic relationships. This foregrounds the number one limitation of rom-com as a genre for radical feminists of earlier decades, perhaps best summed up by a subtitle from George Cukor's 1939 *The Women* (USA): 'It's all about the women – and their men.'

Postmodern Narratives and the Recidivist Male

While backward masculinity must either reform or be punished in the previous stories, some films directed by men use melodrama to explore the issue in a more ambivalent way. If Henri Bergson (1911: 87) has identified mechanical rigidity in living creatures as comedy's cornerstone, the inadaptability and awkwardness of the regressive male always leaves him open to elements of ridicule. However, several films go beyond Blanc's blurring of the boundaries of male filmmaker and character through self-casting, to ally narrative point of view so unambiguously with the director's own, often self-deprecating, perspective that little angle remains for judgement. The result is to locate the authorial and implied audience position closer to straight allegiance with the character than to the kind of critical distance towards

him often invited by his actions. An observation by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007: 15), that irony, in global popular culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s, has frequently allowed retrograde masculinity to resurface, is germane; as we shall see, the multiplication of representations adhering to this mould in the French rom-com gathers force in the 2000s.

Mensonges et trahisons offers such a divided perspective on male failure and romantic unease. While in previous examples the story was split between characters, here it belongs exclusively to stand-up comedian Édouard Baer's beleaguered protagonist Raphaël, thanks to both narrative focus and the formal privileging of his point of view. The film opens on an extreme close-up of Raphaël's face and introduces his voiceover, designed here to align the viewer with a strikingly sexist point of view. As the camera moves out, it becomes apparent that Raphaël is listening to a woman sitting opposite him, while his voice informs us in a bored tone that she has been recounting her life to him 'in detail' for the last hour, and that he switched his attention some time ago to the conversation of two men seated at the next door table in the café where the scene is taking place. These two are discussing a new relationship with a woman in which one is involved, analysing whether or not the lady in question has 'given the right signals'. Raphaël expresses amazement that men have gone from 'that', followed by an inserted scene of a caveman forcing himself on a woman after beating her, to 'this', in other words modern day courtship with all its complications and uncertainties. An audible snippet of the conversation in which his interlocutor, in a caricature of vacuous femininity, discusses her (typically for the genre, 'superfluous') job in fashion, dispels any doubt that it is the primitive scene that Raphaël prefers.

This is not to say that Raphaël's character is simply a brute. In fact, another character, Kevin (popular comedian Clovis Cornillac), a footballer who employs him to write his biography, is a parody of bestial masculinity. Priding himself on promiscuity and openly discussing his sex life – including an occasion when he ‘took [a girl] a bit violently’ – he provides a foil for Raphaël's more nuanced position. For, like the male characters of US ‘relationship’ films since the 1970s examined by Shumway (2003a: 167) (and reversing the dynamic of screwballs where women typically – with a handful of possible exceptions or nuances [Rowe 1995: 145-69] – learnt their need for a male [Neale and Krutnik 1990: 148]), Raphaël finds he needs a relationship. Hence the rest of the film dramatises his struggle to overcome his atavistic urges and behave reasonably, including embracing the positive aspects of a modern, assertive femininity that, while terrifying, is not without its positive aspects.

Attal's romantic comedies deploy voiceover and narrative perspective in an equivalent fashion to cue audiences to find sexism funny and male anxiety endearing. In the previous section I detailed how his first feature *Ma femme est une actrice* (2001) objectifies Charlotte Gainsbourg and twists fear about female professional success into the spectre of female infidelity, which the narrative never wholly dismisses. *Ils se marièrent* (2004) adopts an equally narcissistic perspective and an even more ambivalent stance towards contemporary femininity, and towards the range of male behaviour that is acceptable in heterosexual partnerships. Filmed in an Allen-esque naturalistic mode, this film eschews the use of self-reflexive address found in both *Mensonges* and *Ma femme*. However, the filmmaker does (again) star. Moreover, while the title and opening suggest a focus on the relationship between his character Vincent and his wife Gabrielle (Gainsbourg), feminine subjectivity is soon relegated to make room for scenes between Attal and

male friends, described by Communist paper *L'Humanité* as 'joint-smoking, poker-playing, neo-primitives, obsessed with cars and bimbos, amongst whom one is cheating on his wife and another fancies himself a Don Juan' (Anon 2004). Their activities also include note-comparing on their various romances, in particular complaining on the part of Vincent's friend Georges (Chabat) about his wife Nathalie. A clue as to the interpenetration of Vincent's and Attal's attitudes is provided by this character. Played by Emmanuelle Seigner as an avowed and belligerent feminist and an 'unruly' – with the negative connotations originally traced to the word by Rowe (1995: 400) – hysteric, Nathalie constitutes an unsubtle anti-feminist caricature. By contrast, saintly Gabrielle's final decision to say nothing about the affair which she has guessed her husband is having reads in this light as male wish fulfilment fantasy.

By the mid-2000s, numerous features of these films become recognisable tropes within the subgenre of the male-oriented rom-com. In *Ma Vie en l'air* (Rémi Bezançon, 2005), Yann's (Vincent Elbaz – like Baer and Attal, another popular, *jolie laid* actor, with a long, hooked and asymmetrical nose) neurosis is channelled into a fear of flying. Dispensing even with much of the usual couching of misogyny within self-deprecation, Bezançon has the nagging girlfriend Charlotte, with whom Yann settles down, throw away his beloved comic collection, symbolising masculine culture. She demands children and marriage, taking control of his apartment to invite her best friend over for conversation restricted to the topics of childbirth and dieting. The camera positions us to occupy Yann's point of view in the face of this extreme stereotype of female self-absorption, in such a way that we are primed to delight in his taboo-busting but aggressive response: that swallowing sperm is the best diet. Undemanding, tracksuit-clad 'ladette' Alice (Marion Cotillard), the girl next door,

for whom Yann ditches Charlotte at the altar, inhabits the role of idealised male fantasy. The narrative does not even venture inside the church to examine the effects of this appalling act of treachery on his fiancée. Even more extreme is *Ce soir, je dors chez toi* (2007). This film stars well-known television comedian Jean-Paul Rouve, who actually resembles a young Woody Allen, a likeness underlined here through his character's professional status as a writer. Paired with the doe-eyed, slim but curvaceous Mélanie Doutey, his character Alex's stance towards his partner is one of openly expressed fear. The title refers to Alex's reluctance to move in with his girlfriend, whom he dreams about morphed into a military figure giving him orders, or before whose naked body in the shower he is struck dumb, in a scene which then conveys his desire for her by lingering on her naked torso and adding 'sexy' music composed of moans. However, such 'effeminate' traits as nervousness and passivity are counterbalanced by the character's linkage elsewhere with behaviours coded as masculine: where Yann of *Ma vie en l'air* hoarded vintage comics, Alex is extremely protective of his record collection. These details signify both nostalgia, perhaps for a time of greater gender differentiation, and a desire to cling to rational order in the face of the more 'intuitive' realm of the feminine.

Also deserving of a mention here are two films by Raphael Fejtő, *Osmose* (2003) and *L'Âge d'homme...maintenant ou jamais!* (2007), both starring Romain Duris. In the earlier text romance plays second fiddle to male friendship, contributing to a trend that I will discuss in more detail shortly. The second film, though, focuses specifically and overtly – including through voiceover – on the 'plight' of man unsure of his role in the modern relationship. Once again, caricatured markers of masculinity sit cheek by jowl with conventionally feminine traits. Thus Samuel speaks with his mouth full, engages in elaborate hand-slapping rituals to greet his

male friends and is incapable of doing the weekly food shop. Yet he is obsessed with footwear; indecision – and a fondness for posing before the mirror – characterises a clothes shopping trip; and he sports a ‘man-bag’. Indeed, slim-built Duris’ physical feminisation in the film is underscored on several occasions, such as when Samuel and best friend Jorge (Clément Sibony) hang out in Jorge’s bathroom, while Samuel takes a foam-filled bath, and discuss sexual insecurities and the idea of shaving one’s testicles. In this scene the camera also lingers on Jorge’s reflection in the mirror as he preens and searches his head for white hairs: a rare suggestion that today’s cult of youth is not restricted to women [Figure 12].



Figure 12: Metrosexuality in *L'Âge d'homme*

Several details of *L'Âge d'homme* echo other films discussed here and especially *Mensonges et trahisons*. As in that film, nostalgia for a simpler era is literalised by a fantasy involving cavemen; and Fejtő's film also exploits the device of including characters who represent more backwards visions of maleness against which we are invited to judge the hero favourably. To its credit, the film does dare to delve deeper into the sexual component of male role confusion, through a throwaway

rhetorical question Tina poses to Samuel: ‘Do you think it’s normal that when I type “s” into Google I get “sex, bitch, fuck [in English]”?’’. Wolf has argued that the pornography and fashion industries’ casting of women in submissive positions, often involving sexual violence, has created a situation where men and women have lost touch with instinctive sexuality, based on mutual gratification and exchange (1991: 131-78). A poster visible in the background in Samuel and Tina’s apartment showing a ‘titillating’ image of a woman’s naked backside suggests the extent to which female objectification is normalised in culture. This fleeting concern with both genders, however, is generally edged out by the usual melodramatisation of male experience, such as when Samuel goes to see an apartment for rent and is clearly rejected on sight because the other potential tenant is a beautiful young woman: a typically exceptional – and unlikely – instance of sexism in reverse. Equally, a happy ending showing Samuel and Tina on a paradisiac beach, and that has Samuel’s voiceover conclude simply that ‘it’s fine to be useless’, coupled with the fact that he has not told Tina about an instance of infidelity, suggests that the text embraces a world largely uncomplicated by female demands to be treated with openness, fairness and respect.

The Buddy Film as Rom-Com

Friends frequently play an important role as sounding board or point of comparison in rom-com, while adding elements of the buddy narrative, as in *Ils se marièrent* and indeed the majority of films in the previous group, along with many others, may increase commercial potential for directors globally with their eye on the ‘date movie’ market. However, Moine (2007b: 165-7) has argued that a particularly marked focus on male friendships even in rom-com is nonetheless typically French.

It is also the case that the global rom-com has witnessed a progressive masculinisation over at least the last two decades (Deleyto 2003: 172; Jeffers McDonald 2009: 147). Recently, the enormous success of Judd Apatow's buddy film rom-com hybrids, starting with *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (USA 1996), has lent the cycle renewed vigour. With roots, then, in both national tradition and transnational developments, a final subgroup of recent French comedies explores the question of romantic suffering within a more exclusively male context.

In *Le Coeur des hommes 1* and *2* (Esposito, 2003 and 2007), both of which featured in the box office top 20 for their year, men's escape from their wives to an idyllic holiday setting explicitly represents freedom from a feminine influence perceived as representing restraint and routine, against which they frequently rail. Esposito even has one of the men's much younger girlfriends pronounce beatifically that she does not need any female companionship, as she has him. However, films presenting buddy duos often even more clearly replace heterosexual relations with homosocial, and often the spectre of homoerotic, ones. Although similar observations have been made with regard to Hollywood cinema (Deleyto 2003: 173), in this case the substitution of man for woman can be understood in the context of a French tradition in which the male has often incorporated the feminine (Vincendeau 1993:22; 2000b: 228; see also Sarde 1983: 11).

A film from 1995, *Les Apprentis*, for example, constructs homosocial bonds as highly intimate within a comic exploration of male anxiety and dysfunction. The film laments the shortcomings of contemporary masculinity while simultaneously extending its exponents comprehension, both by aligning the perspective exclusively with them and occasionally using humour to celebrate the masculine. The heroes, Antoine (François Cluzet) and Fred (Guillaume Depardieu), exist at the periphery of

society, mostly out of work and living for free in a borrowed apartment. Antoine conforms to the Allen archetype, plagued by anxiety and hypochondria and told by ex-girlfriend Sylvie that if they had remained together, she would still be poor, badly dressed and hungry and would never have had an orgasm. His hangdog attitude is comically extreme, as when he fails to secure a job writing crosswords because he has only chosen words like *loneliness*, *suicide* and *renunciation*. Consonant with the late Depardieu's reputation as a wild child, Fred, in contrast, is the irrepressible comic eccentric, his physical excesses (pulling off his shirt in the street and putting his arm round a stranger) coupled with a childlike innocence, including ignorance of all practical matters. He is also effeminate, with his long blonde hair and the slender, hairless torso he often displays. More suggestively, he and Antoine spend a considerable amount of narrative time semi-clad in their flat, often lounging together on the bed. On one occasion, as they lie together chatting about sex, the camerawork and lighting underline intimacy, firstly by shooting the pair from outside the room, showing only their feet, as though not wishing to intrude, then shrouding their exchange in darkness. After Antoine tells an erotic story, Fred admits he has an erection, before they fall asleep together. Homo-erotica is also referenced by the intermittent presence of a gay friend, who likens the central duo to his parents, asks if their relationship has become sexual yet and offers, albeit perhaps in jest, to fellate Fred.

Les Apprentis is ambiguous in its construction of femininity through a masculine lens. Both Antoine and Fred are fascinated, as well as intimidated, by women. Sylvie's indictment of her relationship with Antoine may be harsh, but his ineptitude and self-obsession suggest it is warranted. In other respects, she is a friend and support to him. Fred's difficulties with women relate even more explicitly to

their increased sexual confidence and freedom. His idealised image of the actress on whom he becomes fixated, Agnès, is shattered when she reveals she has a boyfriend but is happy for them to have sex in front of the latter, expressed by the comically literal shattering of a pane of glass behind Fred as the news is delivered. Fred cannot, though, be said to be a much better romantic prospect than Antoine, his love declaration consisting of the revelation that the sight of his darling makes him think he should take a bath. The film thus situates the bulk of the blame for masculinity's woes with men themselves. This does not preclude a wistful celebration of Antoine and Fred's nonconformity and childlike masculine vitality, as in a utopian final scene – which is narratively unmotivated (since Antoine has suffered a breakdown and even his relationship with Fred is on shaky ground) – in which the pair play football with children in the street to the strains of rousing Italian music, the final shot fading to black on an image of Antoine's smiling face.

An updated take on the model of rom-coms in which women barely feature is provided a decade later by *Je préfère qu'on reste amis*, this time starring Depardieu senior (Gérard) opposite Jean-Paul Rouve, as Serge and Claude, two ordinary and lonely single men who become friends while struggling to find a woman. The film is clearly indebted to buddy rom-com *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, USA 2005), as it borrows the Hollywood hit's device of having the heroes sneak into weddings to chat up female guests, at the suggestion of older and more worldly divorcee Serge. The men lack, however, American stars Vince Vaughan and Owen Wilson's relative good looks. While Depardieu is just within the bounds of healthy size in this film, he makes an undeniably craggy, if charming, 59 year old. As for Rouve, his physical 'plainness' is magnified here even more than in *Ce soir*, through his succession of drab grey suits and in particular through the playful fact that his dating agency has

all its members adopt the pseudonym of a celebrity. Rouve's is Johnny Depp, locating his mediocrity in a negative comparison with ideals of physical perfection but also, interestingly, suggesting that troubled masculinity goes hand in hand with being French (rather than American). Once again we are presented with a highly feminised persona, too, notably through Claude's hypochondria: a scene in which he literally takes the place previously occupied by Serge's young daughter in a doctor's consultation room uses a graphic match to make a humorous comparison.

In this film it is above all dialogue and language that underscore the status of Serge and Claude's friendship as a substitute for heterosexual romance. Early in the film their interaction mimics the rites of courtship, as Claude leaves the more independent Serge various messages, then asks, 'why didn't you call?'. When Claude falls ill, Serge abandons a date in order to tend to 'my Claude', putting him to bed to gentle piano strains in the score. The low point at the end of the second act consists of a rift not between Claude and a woman but Claude and Serge, over a woman (Serge wrongly accuses Claude of flirting with his ex-wife), prompting Claude to pronounce with all the petulance of a wronged lover that 'your behaviour has not given me much appetite for continuing our relationship'. The film's ending, after thwarting Claude's union with a woman with whom he has fallen in, reconciles Claude and Serge against the romantic backdrop of the Manhattan skyline, accompanied by a song called 'The One To Love', with the latter admitting: 'I've spent 15 years looking for a woman and since meeting you, I feel a bit less alone and stupid.' Like *Les Apprentis*, then, *Je Préfère* mobilises the utopian and transformative codes of romance in the domain of male friendship. It is pertinent to note in this context that Deleyto, in his work on friendship in global rom-coms, gives only one equivalent example, *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, USA 2009)

(although it might be argued that at least one more is offered by teen buddy rom-com *Superbad* [Greg Mottola, USA 2007]). As he observes, the conflation of friendship with the ‘uncanny intensity’ and ‘magic space’ usually reserved for desire ‘puzzles even as it fascinates’ (Deleyto 2011; see also Deleyto 2003).

Les Apprentis and *Je Préfère qu’one reste amis* demonstrate clearly the inadequacy of any interpretation of a film, especially a comedy, based exclusively on narrative details. Its heroes could be described as dysfunctional, semi-criminal egomaniacs and dull, socially inept skirt-chasers respectively; yet they are made loveable by humour and performance. In general, the tragic qualities of the melodramatised males of this chapter are tempered to varying degrees by featuring in comedy, which can render even the surface trappings of melodrama themselves laughable.

It would therefore be impossible to classify too rigidly the functions of the suffering heroes of contemporary French rom-com. Nonetheless, the melodramatised male does appear so frequently in recent French rom-com that a number of sub-trends are discernible in his depiction. Films by female directors Serreau, Akerman, Thompson and Balasko, as well as Blanc’s *Embrassez qui vous voudrez*, while they show different degrees of sympathy for a retrograde masculinity, suggest fairly unequivocally that it has no place in the modern relationship. Another raft of male-directed films, by contrast, displays a more conflicted attitude towards reactionary gender roles and male characters, betraying a wistfulness for a society in which women were subordinate and conformed to old-fashioned ideas of femininity. These span both all-out rom-coms and films which are also or more exclusively reliant on buddy dynamics. In general, melodrama is a key register for French comedy’s exploration of the demands for man to adapt in order to be successful in heterosexual

coupling today, whether this is construed as a workable challenge, an unnecessary exigency or, in an increasingly prominent trend at the close of the 2000s, a hopeless struggle.

ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES

As several film scholars (Ince 2002; Johnston 2002; Swamy 2006) have noted, in the years up to and following the passing in 1999 of French laws grouped under the umbrella term *Pacte Civil de Solidarité* (PaCS), which allow couples who are not heterosexual partners access to some of the rights enjoyed by married couples, the on-screen visibility of alternative (non-heterosexual) sexuality in mainstream cinema has ballooned. A handful of these depictions occur in films roughly fitting the rom-com profile, often exploring the challenges of reconciling homosexuality with heteronormative social desires linked to family structures.

Of course, the increasing prominence of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities and individuals forms part of a wider cultural phenomenon in France (and elsewhere). As well as the substantial attention ‘gay’ issues, especially arising from the PaCS and related questions – such as gay marriage and the absence of legal sanctions for gay parenting in France – have attracted in mainstream newspapers, *Canal Plus* broadcasts an annual ‘Gay Night’ to coincide with Gay Pride and signs of the ‘increasing visibility of homosexuals in the media’ (Anon 2000: 25) are everywhere. The election in 2001 of the openly gay Bertrand Delanoë as mayor of Paris represents a milestone in French tolerance of homosexuality. Delanoë is still mayor today in 2013 – although in 2002 a failed attempt by openly homophobic Muslim immigrant Azedine Berkane to stab him suggests that tolerance is still far from universal. In this section I will begin by

examining rom-coms that simply reflect the prominence of homosexuality today in a relatively tokenistic way, before looking in more detail at how the genre feeds into more complex debates about queer or alternative identities and sexualities. Finally, I will examine how it seeks to reorient the traditional family to accommodate these new configurations.

Token Gayness

Gay friends were already so familiar in Hollywood rom-coms by the mid-1990s that *My Best Friend's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, USA 1997) was able to use this recognisable feature to create a new twist on the genre. They are much less common in France, although one features in *Laisse tes mains*, whose debt to the Spanish queer cinema of Almodóvar I have already mentioned; this is itself a rather token allusion, however, since queerness features as a means to make central character Odile, and the whole film, appear edgy, youthful and alternative. The gay character in question is clearly marked as homosexual by his effete performance style and high voice but his life is not explored. Similarly, a gay nightclub features in *Au suivant!* simply as a marker of 'cool', associated with the media world of youthful casting director Jo.

These examples foreground the interpenetration of sexuality and class in the rom-com: the fact that a broadly middle-class genre – especially one disproportionately peopled by 'media types' – is well placed to include gay characters. They also suggest how a dose of homosexuality can sometimes form part of a film's positioning and therefore marketing strategy. This idea can be applied more obviously, for example, to the work of 'on-trend' gay auteur François Ozon. One specific possible instance is a kiss between stars Fanny Ardant and Catherine Deneuve in Ozon's hit film *8 Femmes/8 Women* (2002), which Lucille Cairns (2006:

96) has dismissed as no more than a ‘lesboerotic dalliance’, no sooner initiated than ‘liquidated and disavowed’. These remarks are to be taken in the context of the imbalance in French cinema’s – and indeed in all French cultural production’s (Heathcote, Hughes and Williams 1998: 15-17) – historical portrayal of gay men and of lesbians, the latter group being considerably underrepresented (cf. Ince 2002: 90).³⁶ A similar accusation of gimmickiness could be levelled at a lesbian kiss between Rampling and Bouquet in *Embrassez*, although it is less sexualised than in 8 *Women* and contributes to the yearning for a feminine utopia discernible in the film.

Slightly more considered in its inclusion of a secondary lesbian thread is female director Amanda Sthers’ *Je vais te manquer* (2009), in which Anna (Cécile Cassel), one of the daughters of terminally ill central character Julia, is a lesbian. A mark of the film’s greater openness is that Anna’s sexuality is neither suppressed nor caricatured. We learn that she is gay through an early sequence in which we see her pick up a woman in a club, then leave her conquest in bed with a cursory goodbye the next morning. This detail avoids the stereotype of the clingy lesbian/woman (although Anna’s partner, displeased to be abandoned, might fit this bill) and instead forms part of Anna’s broader characterisation as acerbic and introverted, particularly in response to her mother’s illness. Lesbianism is an important but not all-encompassing feature of her identity and it is not desexualised.

Returning to male homosexuality, the reverse is true of the gay character in another ensemble film from the previous year, *Modern Love*. Here the gayness of Jérôme, best friend of protagonist Elsa, is so token as to be neutralised by falling for Elsa during the narrative. Embodying all the clichés of feminised homosexual

³⁶ This double standard is reproduced in Alain Brassart’s *L’Homosexualité dans le cinéma français* (2007), in which he omits to discuss even lesbian-themed mega-hit *Gazon maudit*.

identity as sensitive, attentive and house-proud, Jérôme proves the perfect boyfriend. However, despite him having abandoned his gay sexuality for her, Elsa ultimately decides that he is not ‘my man’: an obvious slur on his ‘ersatz’ masculinity. Put differently, the film unwittingly brings into relief the threat posed by homosexuality, an obstinate fly in the ointment for the traditional heterosexual romance plot, precisely by disavowing and then punishing that sexuality. It can thus be situated in the context of the homophobic backlash that has inevitably accompanied the official recognition of homosexual couples and the growing presence of gay life in France (cf. Johnston 2002: 23). Nor, it should be noted, are open expressions of homophobia absent from French comedy. Alain Brassart (2007: 238-9) discusses the obvious ambivalence of Veber’s hit satire on political correctness *Le Placard/The Closet* (2001) on this question, encapsulated by the remark of the openly ‘tolerant’ company director: ‘That poof is a drag.’ In rom-com, a negatively constructed wrong partner in ensemble piece *Au secours, j’ai trente ans* (2004), selfish patriarch Thomas, is repulsed by his wife’s gay friend’s public displays of affection towards his partner (and suggests that homosexuality may be the cause of a cancer the character develops). More subtly – and recalling the same actor’s embodiment of a straight character’s gay transgression ‘despite himself’ in *La Vérité ou presque* – in *Les Petits Mouchoirs* Max (François Cluzet) reacts with revulsion when a male friend communicates his (in fact supposedly platonic) ‘love’ for him. Attal’s backward male Vincent in *Ils se marièrent* also includes disgust at the idea of two men kissing in his list of attributes. As I have argued in discussing melodramatised masculinity in this film, the difference is that in this case the audience is generally invited to identify with the homophobic character. In this way it is the worst offender within this group of films that tends to extend limited attention or hostility to homosexual

identities, while nonetheless registering their existence as a mainstream cultural development.

Queer Identities and Gay Sexuality

The presence of gay characters as one minimal element of otherwise pro-heterosexual narratives in the films detailed so far clearly falls a long way short of any self-consciously queer filmmaking practice. In fact, Bill Marshall has argued that this limitation applies to French cinema more generally: ‘The more positive images to be found in mainstream film [are] neither a way of placing gay desire dynamically in the forefront of a postmodernist cinema, as with Almodóvar’s activities in post-Franco Spain, nor were they to be challenged by a New Queer Cinema in the Anglo-American sense, which would revel in the abject’ (1998: 262). This situation appears unchanged in the 2010s; certainly the French rom-com has only occasionally been queered.

It is important here to make a distinction between identity positions and sexuality itself. Any sustained attempt to evoke gay desire is absent from most of the films detailed so far (although *Je vais te manquer* does at least make a lesbian pick-up look relatively ‘sexy’, by suggesting the chemistry between two attractive young women through an exchange of gazes and flirtatious remarks). This distinction goes right to the heart of some of the differences between the Anglo-American tendency to ‘revel’ in homosexual desire and a French one to sublimate it. A comparison between the French PaCS and the British civil partnership is telling. While the PaCS makes no distinction between same sex and other unmarried couples, such as co-habiting siblings, the civil partnership is available to gay couples only. However the PaCS is also considerably inferior to marriage by comparison with the civil

partnership. Most obviously, British gay couples' right to adopt children through the partnership has not been given to 'PaCSed' French couples. Paradoxically, deprived of a collective (unassimilated) voice, French people identifying themselves with alternative sexualities have less means to make their desire for equal rights heard.³⁷

A rom-com that illustrates well the distinction between identity and sexuality is *Chouchou* (2003). The film stars Elmaleh as the eponymous Chouchou, a cross-dressing illegal Moroccan immigrant whose character originated in the performer's cult comic stage shows. It certainly celebrates difference, as the gentle and helpless Chouchou, whose goals comprise a job and preferably the chance to wear women's clothes, gradually wins the hearts of all those around 'her' and gains the confidence to defy those who seek to obstruct her modest desires. A scene in which she tells a policeman that his gun is a phallic symbol and his authoritarian career choice a symptom of repressed libido epitomises the narrative's intoxicating disregard for social legitimacy. The film also contributes to the strong strand of mockery of bourgeois heteronormalcy focalised through the figure of Chabat in *Gazon Maudit* and later *Prête-moi*. Here he plays, against type, the bombastically named Stanislas de la Tour-Maubourg, a homosexual Eastern European who falls for Chouchou in a transvestite club and is finally united with her in a mock wedding ceremony. It is apparent the extent to which this reconfigures the classic rom-com wedding, using actors who have both starred in highly successful examples of the genre (although Elmaleh's *Hors de prix* came later in 2006). On the other hand, Chouchou is a collection of caricatural features of feminised gay masculinity, a scatterbrain who is

³⁷ This is a pan-European distinction splitting Mediterranean countries, broadly, from Protestant Northern European ones. According to Maks Banens (2011), all countries in the first group, which decriminalised homosexuality early (1791 in France), today pursue universalist policies for gay rights, while those in the second group, which decriminalised it much later (1967 in the UK), pursue differentialist ones, forging stronger gay community identities.

obsessed with the colour pink and with Princess Diana. It could be argued that this reflects the highly overdetermined nature of transvestite and transgender femininity itself, which involves an imitation that by nature tends towards caricature. More problematic is the total absence of any real sense of homosexual desire between Chouchou and Stanislas, whose courtship is conveniently rendered highly ‘proper’ by both characters’ humorous association with old-fashioned gender ideals, of feminine chastity and masculine chivalry respectively. While Rollet (2011) cites the absence of specific behaviour associated with gayness as one aspect of the film’s ‘queering’ of the audience’s expectations, for Brassart cross-dressing becomes here merely a gag (2007: 234).

The particular variant of the separation between identity and sexuality effected by *Chouchou* reverses a more common one: the trope of illicit homosexual desire ascribed to a character who identifies themselves as heterosexual. As well as *La vérité ou presque*, *Le Placard* is salient, as Depardieu’s hyper-masculine cipher suffers a breakdown when he realises his homosexual desire for his colleague – and his character is never redeemed. A more obviously romantic example comes in gay directing partnership Ducastel and Martineau’s musical comedy *Crustacés et coquillages* (2005). While the auteur filmmakers – who agree that ‘in France the concept of gay cinema not well defined’ (Anon 2005b) – reject the interpretation of this as a gay film (unlike their more arthouse piece *Drôle de Félix/Adventures of Felix* [2000]) because it also deals with heterosexual libido, the film sanitises neither form of desire. In an alternative take on the classic narrative of the family holiday, in addition to the extra-marital antics of the parents, their son Charly is secretly desired by his visiting friend Martin. One humorous scene, refusing to shy away from the earthier aspects of male homosexuality, features Charly searching for Martin in what

is, unbeknown to him, a local cruising area and being approached fairly aggressively by predatory men. The real shock comes, though, when he encounters his father Marc there. There are also several shots of the male body, included to show Charly and Martin's uninhibited friendship and to display the toned physique of Marc's love interest.

While at the end of *Crustacés*, Marc recognises that he is in fact gay, he explains that he was unable to accept the possibility of fatherhood being foreclosed to him. This raises the important question of the relationship between alternative sexualities and traditional family structures in the rom-com. Indeed, this is the question with which the rom-com genre of reconciliation and renewal is most concerned when it comes to its portrayal of such sexualities.

Homosexuality and the Family

In her 2002 article on 'queering the family' through 'fantasy and the performance of sexuality and gay relations' in rom-coms *Gazon maudit* and *Pourquoi pas moi?* (Stéphane Giusti, 1990), Kate Ince argues that in these texts the paradigm of the bourgeois family shifts to accommodate queer identities. At the end of *Gazon*, lesbian Marijo has joined married couple Laurent and Loli as the triumvirate sets about raising the baby who is the product of a one-time liaison between Laurent and Marijo. Not only that but 'difference proliferates' as there is a hint that Laurent may be starting an affair with another man. In *Pourquoi pas moi?*, several families come together in a Catalan country house for their children – including, unusually, three lesbians (and one gay man) – to break to them the news that they are homosexual. Thanks to the couple-swapping antics of the older generation, by the end of the film, '[a] wholesale "queering" of the family has occurred, which is reinforced by the new

relationships forged by Eva [...] and Nico (with Manuel, a new fellow player in his sports team)' (Ince 2002: 95-6). As Ince notes, the role of performance in constructing gender and identity (not to mention the Spanish setting echoing Almodóvar's work) in the film feeds into its queer aesthetic, as for example when two mothers Diane and Sara's feelings for each other are reawakened by singing a song together for the group. While these women – and Diane's husband Tony – are both singers, Eva's father is a world-famous torero, played by Johnny Hallyday. Even more excessive is the film's finale, which – like visions of the Virgin Mary appearing before Chouchou – uses kitsch to create a 'camp and sentimental' decor and atmosphere, as 'a spangle-attired cabaret singer atop an illuminated podium draped with semi-naked dancers clad as angels/cherubs performs a love song called "Crazy"' (ibid: 95).

Crustacés and also *Pédale douce* (1996) adhere to Ince's model. The 1996 film, as already mentioned, is set in the colourfully excessive world of Parisian drag, which – echoing Kath Weston's (1991) description of the networks formed by some groups of homosexuals in San Francisco – operates in the film as an alternative kinship structure. Brassart rightly attributes *Pédale douce*'s huge success (3.9m spectators) to changing attitudes about homosexuality in France. Thus gay Adrien's assumption of paternity of another man's child is presented as positive – although Alexandre does show up at the christening, prompting a 'liberating' final image of the parental trio and the baby driving around Paris in a car singing the highly camp 'Sans contrefaçon' by Mylene Farmer. Interestingly, in contrast to Tarr and Rollet's (2000: 189) argument that the film's 'outrageous drag queens function primarily as an exotic backdrop to the development of a conventional, heterosexual romance', for Brassart the film's strength lies in the parallels it draws between gay and straight

identities. Thus Adrien's paternal desire echoes Alexandre's wife's fear of being separated from her husband, both of these being socially constructed – as feminist Elisabeth Badinter has observed in relation to parental care in her seminal work *L'Amour en plus* (1980) (Brassart 2007: 234). Where mainstream hit *Pédale douce* foregoes realism in favour of high melodrama and the humour of grotesque caricature, especially through the presentation of resolutely comic actor Timsit [Figure 13], but also in details like transvestite godparents at the christening, *Crustacés* places its auteur favourites Melki and Bruni Tedeschi in a world characterised generally by a naturalistic look and acting style [Figure 14], with gentle comedy here a function of the upbeat tone within an idyllic holiday setting. Thus Béatrix's discovery of Marc's homosexuality prompts not histrionics but a considered reflection on their life together, in which she points out some of the positives of having had a husband with a 'feminine' disposition. In this case the ending stands stylistically apart from the main narrative, as an epilogue returns the central family to their holiday home one year on, now reconfigured so that, while both the children have invited along a heterosexual partner, mother Beatrix's lover Mathieu is on site and so is father Marc's plumber boyfriend. Here the group, all dressed in yellow and oranges, give a mannered, frenzied song and dance performance of the original title song composed by director Martineau with Philippe Miller (echoing in reverse lines from 'La Madrague', famously rendered by Bardot), in which lists of shellfish are jubilantly reeled off in an obvious metaphor for the beauty of nature's diversity.



Figures 13 and 14: Caricatural gay melodrama versus a ‘serious’ consideration of homosexuality in *Pédale douce* and *Crustacés et coquillages*

These two endings from otherwise very different films present queer takes on the French family at least as heavily marked by fantasy as those of *Gazon maudit* and *Pourquoi pas moi?*. However, my interpretation of their resolutions differs slightly from that of Ince, for whom the fantasy dimension of such endings ‘may have a politically performative force’, and who closes by asking whether, in the wake of the PaCS, a traditional model of patriarchal familial identity is likely to give

way to one closer to these idealistic endings. While tying new familial configurations to sequences of happiness and liberation, often associated with motion, excitement and perhaps uplifting song and dance, does demand to be read politically, however, the fantasy elements of these sequences still locate them at some distance from everyday French reality. These familial reconfigurations remain, for now, coded as utopian mirages.

Further rom-coms that interrogate the question of reconciling familial identities and gay sexuality are *L'Homme est une femme comme les autres/Man is a Woman* (Jean-Jacques Zilbermann, 1999), *Belle maman* (1999) and, most recently, *Comme les autres/Baby Love* (Vincent Garenq, 2008). In the first of these comic elements largely give way to melodrama by the end of a tale in which gay Orthodox Jew Simon Eskanazy (Antoine de Caunes) attempts to 'go straight' by marrying in order to secure his inheritance. By the end of the narrative, he stands alone in the rain watching his pregnant wife Elsa walk away and foreclose the possibility of him taking a role in their child's upbringing. Just as its sex scenes make a feminised caricature of Simon's body (virgin Elsa, with Sapphic overtones, likes his rounded buttocks – prominent on the DVD cover and film posters – but is afraid of his 'big thing'), the English title of *Man is a Woman* spells out my suggestion that 'men ultimately deal with the threat of female power *by incorporating it*' (Modleski 1991: 7; my emphasis). Interestingly, in an article published to accompany the film's release in popular paper *L'Événement du jeudi* (Bernard 1998), two young Jewish gay men asked about the film attest to its premise's status as extremely true to life, mirroring a trend they recognised within their communities. It would seem homosexuality was, at the end of the 1990s (and probably still today), very far from

being accepted in those social and religious and/or racial groups where the family still holds greatest sway.

In *Belle maman*, Aghion simply assumes the untroubled existence of *familles homoparentales*, or families with two parents of the same sex, by having Léa's (Deneuve) mother (played by veteran actress Line Renaud) live with her long-term lesbian partner. Léa, we learn, was the product of sperm donation. The 'rose-coloured view of gay parenting' (Johnston 2002: 28) to which this gives rise, through the close and respectful relationship between Léa and her mother(s), is in its own way as utopian as the fantasy families described earlier in this section. Interestingly, Johnston further suggests that this idealisation is linked to the femininity of mother(s) and daughter and draws out a potential double standard in the text with respect to a secondary character, married father Pascal, whose revelation of homosexuality is received as somewhat more shocking.

By 2008 in *Comme les autres*, gay *male* parenting is allowed to take centre stage, in a film about paediatrician Manu's (Lambert Wilson) compulsive desire to be a father. The clichés normally associated with maternal desire (see Chapter 4) are in full force, as Manu finds himself surrounded by adorable children, in particular his niece, and the strength of his longing is sealed when he sacrifices his loving relationship with chiselled judge Philippe (Pascal Elbé) – who has no desire for children – in order to pursue his goal alone. Resulting scenes in which Manu poses as a single straight man when the adoption agent visits speak to the reality that not only do PaCSed couples not have the right to adopt, but being PaCSed to someone of the same sex may hinder an application (Gross 2001: 250). In fact, Manu fails to convince the agent in the scene in question, because he has forgotten to hide a sexually suggestive portrait of a nude man on his apartment wall. This detail is not

trivial. While over-sexualisation of portrayals of gay people reduces their identity to one dimension, I have suggested that avoiding the issue completely excludes that sexuality itself from representation *as a sexuality*. In general, Manu and Philippe could not be more reassuringly characterised, as a doctor and a judge, while Wilson in particular is an actor typically cast as successful, patriarchal characters. Moreover, Manu's exceptional bedside manner with his child patients singles him out as a much more caring potential parent than, for example, his heterosexual sister and her husband, who like to unceremoniously dump their (on one occasion ill) baby daughter on him. The nude image at the adoption interview therefore acts as an important reminder of the couple's sexual identity.

While a significant and growing minority of rom-coms feature gay characters both secondarily and more centrally, the genre itself has not offered a challenge to the absence of a queer cinema as an entity with a distinct identity in France. Indeed, several films incorporate gay elements in a superficial way that appears little more than a bid for trendiness. Views of homosexuality themselves, while suggestive of some progress towards increased acceptance, remain in this genre ambivalent. While homophobia still features, both as an element *in* texts, perhaps critiqued, and occasionally as a feature *of* texts, albeit usually latent, homosexual desire itself also tends to be widely elided and portraits of lesbianism are still few and far between. However, there is no doubt that the rom-com is being forced to recognise in some small measure that heterosexuality no longer has the monopoly on either romance or family structures. This is a small but nonetheless political change, even if it does not exactly constitute the kind of defiant response called for by queer theorists like Lee Edelman (2004) to a mainstream culture whose focus on 'reproductive futurism' has

in the past assigned to homosexuality a burden of negativity. More generally, the portrayal of sexual identity as mobile in several films constitutes another example of the increasing frailty of human bonds and identities that is a theme throughout this thesis.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary French rom-com tracks major shifts in gendered identity that have been increasingly apparent in recent years. Beginning with femininity, if US rom-coms of the 1990s and 2000s have featured rather backward female characters portrayed as losing out in seeking to ‘have it all’, the French rom-com is considerably less monolinear on this point. Notably, feminine rebellion is a recurrent trope associated with the narrative pleasure of exhilarating, subversive humour, just as female friendship is beginning to be the focus of at least some narrative interest. Both features are linked to the higher numbers of female directors working in France than in Hollywood. On the other hand, there appears to be a decline in the representation of female desire in the 2000s. Male desire, in contrast, continues to be more widely catered for both intra- and extra-textually, through the ongoing imbalance between female and male characters’ physical presentation, both in terms of performers’ own appearance and their characters’ construction in films. That is, actresses are being offered to viewers much more obviously as desirable *objects* – whereas actors’ appeal is generally more likely to be a function of character and comic behaviour. Moreover, this situation appears, if anything, to be truer today than ten years ago, with few younger actresses who do not conform to norms of beauty prominent in the genre. The demand to be attractive also applies to older actresses, substantially limiting the apparent democratic value of their increasing presence in

the genre. In any case, the pairing of older men and younger women is still more common than its reverse. Finally, working women are now the norm in rom-com, although across the genre their work is sidelined as unfulfilling (especially in their disproportionately rare roles in higher status jobs) and/or superfluous (in medium to low status ones). This does not prevent female filmmakers especially tackling issues that are significant for women workers today – like sexual discrimination or harassment and the difficulties of balancing career and family life – in an intermittent way. However, such problems are far from the focus of a genre known for overlooking issues of wealth and class and promoting love as the answer to all problems.

As if in response to female rebellion in the rom-com, the 2000s have seen a progressive masculinisation of the genre. This emulates the direction taken by the global rom-com and is paralleled by an increasing number of male directors working in the French genre, no doubt partly in reaction to the commercial success enjoyed by female (as well as some male) counterparts in the 1990s. A broadly increased focus on masculinity falls into three sub-trends: films by women and men looking with humour and some sympathy at the predicament of the new man, whose gendered identity appears to rest on contradictions as confusing as does that of women today; misogynistic films by men positioning the spectator to be on the side of backward male characters, notably through the use of postmodern irony; and films also by men that remap the rom-com as a buddy film to suggest the superfluity of women altogether. These to some extent fit a chronological pattern of alternate dominance leading up to the present day. Just as Modleski (1991) described the situation in gender studies scholarship and in culture generally of the 1980s in terms of ‘feminism without women’, one contemporary (presumably eventually self-

abortive) impetus in both global and French cinema is towards a rom-com without women.

If the rom-com is becoming increasingly masculine, it is also becoming increasingly inclusive of alternative sexualities – but much more gradually. Representations of gay and lesbian identities in the genre are still marginalised. Most common is the presence of a token, secondary homosexual character, who is not accorded the benefit of narrative subjectivity or, often, anything more than an ornamental value – one frequently couched, furthermore, in stereotypical terms. In a handful of films, however, homosexuality takes centre stage, sometimes still through superficial comic caricatures but on occasion through a more sympathetic lens. An important theme is the possibility of reconciling homosexuality with the rom-com's sanctioning of the family. In line with the genre's utopian status, several films depict idealised visions of 'queered' families. This is an important endorsement of alternative forms of social organisation even if it is broadly limited to depictions of the middle-classes and coloured by fantasy.

At the same time, the problems involved in marrying the various identity positions involved in gay and familial life are not entirely ignored by the genre. Indeed, the rom-com is surely an accurate social barometer in suggesting that the persistence of family values in France is still the biggest obstacle to social acceptance of newer identities in general, be they queer, feminine, masculine or a combination of the above. The role of the family in the rom-com is the subject of my next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FAMILY AFFAIRS

The French family has always occupied a position of ambivalent status and cultural prestige, and this is much in evidence today. This chapter will examine romantic comedy's exploration of new familial configurations of the Gallic family in a contemporary climate where, as partner choice is less determined by material and dynastic interests and more by individual choice, 'so the love story has become the essential basis, the *raison d'être* and the *sine qua non* of the family unit' (Holmes 2006: 115). This will encompass, on the one hand, the genre's often celebratory depiction of the nuclear family's march towards its long prophesied death and, on the other, its more frequently visible role in translating a corollary trend for pro-familial discourses.

The historical background to these counterpoised moves is that which underpins this thesis in its entirety and has been, in Western society at any rate, well documented. Woman's move in the twentieth century into the public sphere has caused unprecedented change to societal organisation and placed her, the traditional family-maker, at a nexus of several life 'choices', amongst which motherhood is – at least ostensibly – only one. Capitalist society's contrivance to mobilise the female workforce looks from the perspective of the early twenty-first century to have created the single most formidable threat to the propagation of those societies from within, with birth rates declining in the vast majority of Western countries. Having said that, and although (or perhaps because) France's attachment to the notion of

individual freedom has always complicated her attitude towards the family, post-war French politics have been pro-natalist and family-oriented (Duchen 1994: 96-127). By the end of the period being examined in this thesis, in 2010, France represents a demographic curiosity, with the second highest birth rate in Europe (Badinter 2010: 34), while ethnographic evidence suggests economic considerations, as opposed to personal choice, are the key factor in many French women's decision not to have an even greater number of children (Shepherd 1998: 23).³⁸ Despite soaring divorce rates, then, in its most straightforward sense denoting procreation, the French family appears in this light to be an institution in rude health.

What is clearly undergoing considerable flux is the nature of the family as a social unit. Most obviously, the dethroning of marriage has led to the rise of broken families as well as what is commonly termed *la famille recomposée*: strictly, families where one (or both) of the parents already has children from a previous union, although the phrase loosely evokes complex, sprawling and structurally unconventional families in general. Other changes are more convoluted but all can be rooted in the destabilisation of patriarchy and the greater fluidity of roles occupied by each of the genders. Since second wave feminism's liberation of women from automatic responsibility for the domestic sphere, there is some evidence of a rise to prominence of the nurturing father, as famously depicted in French film comedy by Serreau in her 1985 hit *Trois hommes et un couffin/Three Men and a Cradle*. However, sociologist Catherine Hakim (2000: 10) argues that in the 21st century still very few men in fact take on the raising and education of children as their principal activity, even in Scandinavian countries where generous offers of paternity leave invite them to do so. Accordingly, after a flurry of activity around

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France's birth rate is topped only by the Republic of Ireland, where abortion is still illegal.

him in (global) US cultural discourses in the 1980s and early 1990s (see Kaplan 1992: 184-8) and 1990s films (Mazdon 2000: 64), the nurturing father appears to fade somewhat from public consciousness. He is not, in any case, a central figure in the French romantic comedies of 1990s and 2000s and will only appear in a secondary way in this chapter.³⁹ All the same, motherhood is today certainly less often an exclusive life-goal for women, who are leaving it until later, more often limiting themselves to one child and more often combining the experience with a career. The latter is particularly true in France where, relative to other European countries, high numbers of women return to work after having children (Badinter 2010: 234).

The *mise-en-scène* of what well-known French psychoanalyst Elisabeth Roudinesco (2002) has called *la famille en désordre* is fast becoming a cliché of studies of French cinema. Prédal (1998: 19) has noted its thematic prevalence in the work of *jeune cinéma français* directors – Ozon, Klapisch and Dominick Moll are obvious examples. It has also been noted in Chapter 2 that the recent move away from the cinematic representation of actual family to the portrayal of surrogate or tribal community groups identified by Powrie (2007) constitutes one of several reactions to the decline of the traditional family. Vincendeau (2008) has further pointed to an opposed counter-reaction to the same phenomenon, especially since the 1990s, as the family becomes more disarrayed, through films focusing on relatively stable family groups. It is such ‘true’ families, and their depiction in rom-coms, that will provide the focus of this chapter.

³⁹ Even within *Trois hommes et un couffin*, E. Ann Kaplan notes that the sexualisation of the girl baby not only speaks of distaste for adult female sexuality, as argued by Modleski, but also serves to keep the male characters in a mode more ‘suitable’ for them than nurturing fatherhood – that of romance (Kaplan 1992: 196).

THE ENSEMBLE FAMILY ROM-COM

In Chapter 2 I argued that ensemble rom-coms are markedly frequent in France. In particular, echoing the the historical predilection for mixing comedy with ‘serious’ themes outlined in my introduction, rom-com here frequently hybridises with family melodrama. This tends to produce films focusing on two or more romantic plot-lines across the generations. In a US context, the cultivation of cross-generational family audiences has been linked to the advent of home video consumption (as well as protests about R-ratings) in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Allen 1999: 113-6). As already mentioned, such films in any case have a wide target audience and provide a platform for a gallery of bankable stars. Given theorisations of melodrama as the woman’s film *par excellence*, as well as French female filmmakers’ documented interest in interrogating the status of the modern family – notably, in the 1980s and 1990s, through the prism of comedy (Tarr with Rollet 2001: 1992) – it is equally unsurprising that the majority of these hybrid ensemble rom-coms released in France in the past 20 years have been made by women. In the context of a French genre where women’s participation is already strikingly high (43 out of 115 films, or 37%, rising to 41% if including the 11 films on which a woman received a writing credit, as marked on the filmography), within the ensembles women directed 18 out of 43 films (44%), but including women with writing credits – since narrative structure is born in the screenplay – raises the figure to 26 out of 43 or 60%.

In Chapter 2, discussing the example of *Mariages!*, I noted ensemble films’ rejection of romance as a cure-all. They thus refuse to legitimise one-dimensional identities, which have in the past been culturally prescribed to women in particular. This feature helps to explain the appeal of the *choral* film for female filmmakers.

Discourses of individualism have been understood as a fundamentally masculine take on the world. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin have argued that the Oedipal imperative to separate from the mother is less powerful for women, with the result that their sense of identity is more entwined with that of others (see Holmes 2006: 142). At the same time, more socially-oriented feminists have seized on Foucauldian ideas of *general*, as opposed to *total* history, returning women to the framework by insisting on the insignificance of the individual life (see Kaplan 1996: 3).⁴⁰ The ensemble narrative conveys a similarly relativistic conception of the world that is inherently resistant to romance's pigeonholing of the genders in familial roles.

This stands in direct contrast to the logic of strict causality, progress and resolution informing the traditional rom-com. While feminists have accused the 'seamless' linear style of the classical Hollywood romance of essentialising the roles presented, the ensemble narrative remains episodic, with different stories – and characters – jostling for investment, often displaying a degree of tonal discord, and the seams more readily apparent. For Tröhler, in fact, multi-protagonist films of the 1990s echo the Neorealist movement in a number of ways and notably in 'constitut[ing] chronicles of reality today and their many characters are offered as multiple facets of a socio-political portrait. In this respect, *French* films are perhaps rather specific [...]' (2000: 86; original emphasis). Tröhler's arguments echo my own linkage between the ensemble focus and an interest in social reality that has been seen as prevalent in French cinema, romantic and otherwise, both historically (see for example Grossvogel 2005: 2-3) and today (Moine 2007b: 144). As in my earlier alignment of the tribal multi-protagonist film with the discourse of intimacy,

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For example Kristeva (1993).

concerned with the everyday and ordinary, there is a tension here with romance's ostensible rejection of realism. I stress *ostensible* as the problematic nature of such an opposition is a precept of this work, detailed in Chapter 1, where I have argued that romance can play a role in imaginative identity-construction in the real world. All the same, the most formulaic manifestations of the romantic genre are associated with contrived plotting and instances of the miraculous. In the ensemble, however, this is framed by a relatively realist aesthetic, especially when it comes to the topos of the universal, and therefore in one sense humdrum, family. Such an aesthetic has repercussions for the films' style. Namely, in the ensemble films formal details generally conform to a more recognisably 'French' mould, with longer takes, fewer close-ups, longer shots and tableaux compositions, and fewer meretricious stylistic flourishes altogether (see also Chapter 5). This contrasts with Mar Azcona's description of US ensembles of the 1990s and 2000s as tending to adopt what Bordwell has dubbed intensified continuity style, characterised by fast editing, 'extreme' focal lengths, a predominance of close-ups and wide-ranging camera movements (Mar Azcona 2010: 39), highlighting the ensemble form's autochthonous roots in France. In this schema – as in the community-focused films – in the family ensemble the romantic tropes of magic and fantasy are often distilled in details of narrative and mise-en-scène. Exemplary here are a number of films whose new romantic elements I examined in Chapter 2. These elements vary from a holiday setting (*Les Marmottes*, *Embrassez qui vous voudrez*) to romantic intertextual allusion (*Les Marmottes*) or a focus on a wedding (*Mariages!*). Notwithstanding such ploys to find space for romance within broadly defined realism, this chapter will nonetheless illustrate that romance in ensemble family films tends to be more diluted than with dyadic or triangular rom-coms. As Krutnik,

quoting Robert C. Allen, has put it: ‘Romance in [the] family films functions as but part of the complex ensemble of “parental, sexual, filial, domestic and kinship relations” that define real and culturally idealised families’ (2002: 137).

It should also be noted that such narratives’ preoccupation with groups of people and governance by a degree of verisimilitude is no guarantor of their ideological commitment to a ‘socio-political description’ of the kind meant by the Neorealists, with their mainly working- class focus. Far from it, one by-product of family stories’ potential for incorporating autobiographical details is their frequently middle-class focus (Vincendeau 2008:16). Middle-class credentials also mirror not only French feminism’s close association with the bourgeoisie, but the transnational phenomenon of postfeminism, as manifested in the media since around the same time as the global rom-com’s renaissance in the 1980s. In France, meanwhile, the middle class has actually been growing thanks to the slow migration into it of the former skilled working class. At the same time, a middle-class focus is in any case a feature of both the French rom-com and indeed French cinema generally.

Bourgeois settings do not in any case detract from the significance of the ensemble film’s reconfiguration of the binary approach to role-assignment that typifies mainstream Hollywood romance. In fact, the episodic structure of these films is closer to television series than to Hollywood, and in particular soap opera, whose own debt to the melodramatic ‘woman’s film’ is overt in its domestic settings and quotidian dramas. Indeed, soap opera’s female address can be linked to its roots in serialised literature, which was often of the romantic variety and, as in the case of France’s *feuilleton*, aimed at a female readership (see Thiesse 1984). This address has been discussed by, amongst others, Modleski ([1982] 1990: 90–103) in ways that resonate with the ensemble romance. According to Modleski, the soap illustrates

human interconnectedness and contingency, dispelling the myth of total individual agency. By dispersing audience investment among different characters, whose stories do not usually all end with romantic union, multi-protagonist films refuse predictability and keep open a sense of uncertain futurity (cf. Mar Azcona 2010: 19 and 38). They also show how one man's gain is another man's loss. This is implicit in my discussion of the French rom-com's foregrounding of the complications of adultery in Chapter 2: it is a *choral* focus which asks the viewer to engage with the pain suffered by betrayed women in *Pédale douce*, *Les Marmottes* and *On connaît la chanson*.

Whether employed by a male or female director (or writer), then, the ensemble rom-com can in this sense be dubbed an anti-romance, or formally anti-familial. The high number of women directors who opt for the family romance *choral* thus suggests their typically ambivalent attitude towards both romance and the family, reconfiguring the latter at one remove from patriarchy. With regard specifically to rom-com, it is interesting to note that research by Sharon Thompson suggests that, where for men romance often ends with conquest, women see it more in terms of an ongoing narrative (see Pearce and Stacey 1995: 20). It is highly appropriate that explicit recognition of this difference by Jaoui's surrogate family ensemble *Le Goût des autres* (2000) comes in the context of women's penchant for watching soap operas, as protagonist Castella is berated by his wife for changing channels at the moment when the on-screen couple come together for a kiss, at which point his interest evaporates.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Je vous trouve très beau* also has a cynical husband criticise his wife – a middle-aged farmer far removed from romantic ideals – for her attachment to a soap.

In other words, the ensemble form may bear structural affinities with women's particular experiences, which include romance and family life, as well as the inextricable cultural narratives associated with them. Modleski even attempts to link her argument to (different) aspects of women's physiological and social being, by proposing that the soap opera's multi-climaxing, interrupted rhythms mimic the structures of both female sexual pleasure and housework. She also compares the ideal soap opera spectator to the mother invested in several childlike egos and, referring to Mulvey's work on classical film narrative's suturing of woman into a position of powerlessness, claims that the idealised female spectator is frequently paralleled by disempowered mother characters in the narrative itself (Modleski 1982: 92). In the French ensemble rom-com, maternal impotence in the face of adolescent rebellion is a central theme in several of the films analysed in this chapter and which I consider as *choraux* to one extent or another, including *Les Marmottes*, *LOL* and *Une semaine sur deux*. In *Les Marmottes*, it is further invoked through the device of a recipe for happiness in a letter left by the dead family matriarch to one of her sons, read at the end of the narrative by the wife from whom he is separated.

More importantly, Modleski's point highlights the fact that the instability of identities already inherent in the ensemble structure can be even more evident in familial formations, where the boundaries of individual identity become indistinct. Significantly, another of Tröhler's arguments, that in multi-protagonist films 'the narrative construction of an audience shuffles between proximity and distance' (2010: 470), extends this familial model of interaction to include the viewer. With these ideas in mind, I would like now to turn to examining some key films in greater detail, starting with three that fall at the more naturalistic end of the stylistic spectrum.

‘Familles: je vous hais’

It is, in fact, more apt to describe Klapisch’s 1996 screen adaptation of Jaoui and Bacri’s play *Un air de famille* as espousing an aesthetic of theatrical realism. Set in the claustrophobic single location of a dimly lit bar one summer’s evening as a family awaits the arrival of one missing member for their weekly dinner, and filmed in the increasingly excruciating slow time of the stage version, the film emblematises French cinema’s tradition of mockery of the bourgeois family. The tension between collectively determined and subjectively conceived identity is to the fore, most obviously in family members’ insistent belittling of one another through the reductionist labels they seem unable to avoid. Interviewed about the film, Klapisch summed it up with the neat phrase: ‘Familiarity is the foe of the family’ (Anon 1993). Themes of stultification and genericity are captured by an early view of the exterior of the matriarch’s residence, a modern block characterised by uniform geometric repetitions, which are bifurcated by straight slats reminiscent of prison bars and shot from below to tower oppressively over the camera. These are reinforced by subtle details of costume - the mother, Madame Ménard (Claire Maurier, familiar as the flawed mother from Truffaut’s 1959 *Les Quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows*), has the same haircut and drab beige coat as her daughter-in-law (Catherine Frot) – and composition – inside the bar, the use of deep focus facilitates the evocation of characters’ confinement by their encasement within architectural frames, while reflective surfaces recalling the sets of Sirk and Fassbinder suggest both incommunicability and resemblance between the family members. The discomfiting presence of a paralysed dog – on one occasion shot to the enervating buzz of a fly – provides another visual metaphor for family in its most

negative incarnation. By contrast, flashbacks to childhood scenes of bouncing on the parental bed, described by Sellier as a ‘sequence of absolute happiness’ (1998: 121), at once acknowledge the paradoxically liberating potential of the secure family space and evoke the tension between its idealisation, along with that of childhood, and (adult) realities.

It is Jaoui and Bacri’s virtuoso dialogue, though, that most revealingly communicates *Un air*’s critique of the kind of restrictive notions that can grow up in a familial context. Initially the most positively presented character is Betty, played by Jaoui herself and a typically unruly role for the playwright-filmmaker-actress. The antipode to Frot’s Yolande, as a thirty-year-old single and independent woman, Betty uses sarcasm to undercut her brother Henri’s (Bacri) advice that she should try harder to get a husband: ‘You don’t catch flies with vinegar’. Her response that ‘it’s incredible how these sayings can change your life’ critiques the thoughtless parroting of received ideas. Madame Ménard’s appropriation of the essentialising cliché that ‘women need breathing space’ is rendered grotesque by her inappropriately girlish hair twirl and self-conscious faraway look. More subtly, patriarchal older brother Philippe’s (Wladimir Yordanoff) proclamative, dictatorial nature is underlined through excess when he invokes the authoritative rhythms of the classical Alexandrine to forbid Betty from wishing Yolande a precipitous ‘happy birthday’: ‘*Tout à l’heure, tous ensemble, au restaurant*’ (‘Save it for later, when we’re all together, at the restaurant’).

The fact that all these instances of linguistic rigidity relate more or less explicitly to coupling relations between the sexes underlines the film’s participation in romantic comedy. This narrative tends in fact to literalise the battle of the sexes, notably through Henri and Philippe’s reactionary attitudes and their interactions with

the female characters. If the views aired by Henri and his failure to listen to and respect his wife Arlette – hence her lateness and finally non-appearance for the dinner – are openly bigoted, second brother Philippe’s attitude towards his own wife Yolande is more insidious. In short, by feigning niceness only to encourage her into submissive weakness, he casts her in the role of inconsequential airhead who must be humoured. The resemblance between a studded choker bought by Philippe for Yolande’s birthday and the dog collar for which it is first mistaken leaves little room for doubt about power relations between husband and wife. It is a measure of the film’s feminist bent that at its close Henri and Arlette are not finally reconciled, while Yolande has ignored Philippe’s attempts to keep her ‘in her place’, got drunk and enjoyed a dance with waiter Denis (Jean-Pierre Darrousin). The narrative is also book-ended by its focus on another romantic relationship, between Betty and Denis. Betty’s initial annoyance at Denis’ failure to call her because she has her own life, ‘like you do’, is incontrovertibly reasonable, placing women on an equal footing with men. That she and Denis finally together escape the oppressive space of the bar on a motorbike allows the rom-com mode to trump that of family drama. It also looks at first glance like a classic naive-cum-regressive finale in which problems melt away. But Denis’ characterisation throughout as kind and unassuming, a foil to the bickering family, along with the fact that Betty occupies the driving seat (unlike, say, with Irène and Jean atop the latter’s Vespa at the end of *Hors de prix*) appears to suggest the possibility of a future for their relationship based on compromise.

Un air also exemplifies the model remarked on by Vincendeau (2008: 16) in post-1960s French cinema of the absent (or otherwise weakened) patriarch.⁴² Here

⁴² For recent examples of absent or deficient patriarchs in French cinema see also Powrie (2007: 296-9).

Monsieur Ménard is dead and his memory ambivalently invoked, with fondness but also through negative comparisons with Henri as outmoded, like the bar as a whole – and by contrast with Philippe, a stereotype of (post) modernity (Sellier 1998: 122). The promotion of the matriarch resulting from this deposing of her masculine counterpart in French cinema further chimes with Modleski's stress on female disempowerment, by lending itself to portrayals of (vain) maternal struggles to shore up the family against social convulsions. Certainly, in this film, impotence is strongly associated with Madame Ménard, who favours paralysed dogs (having given Henri an animal of the same breed as her own erstwhile paraplegic pet), whose attempts to influence her children fall on deaf ears and who is at one point physically incapacitated by a fall down a staircase. In this case, in view of the character's resolutely negative presentation, her disempowerment reads like a punishment for her attempts to hold the family together.

A significant number of other films in the corpus figure family life in this vein, as stagnation or misery. This is often linked to the question of adultery, discussed in Chapter 2, as in *Embrassez qui vous voudrez* and *Mariages!*, or to the issue of freedom more generally – for instance in *La Nouvelle Ève* (see Chapter 3). However, two ensemble rom-com/family drama hybrids by male directors from later in the period of study, *Le premier jour du reste de ta vie* (Rémi Bezançon, 2008) and *Tellement proches* (Nacache and Toledano, 2009) temper the unflattering presentation of family life with positive details and consensual endings that recuperate the unit. Often melodramatic in tone, *Le premier jour* enacts five key days in the life of a couple and their three teenage or twenty-something children. One of these, which has the father diagnosed with cancer, at the same time as it leaves another matriarch paralysed to prevent the splintering of her family, illustrates

a further observation made by Vincendeau (2008: 17) with regard to French cinema's destabilisation of the patriarchal family: the rise of the so-called medical theme.⁴³ The father's illness and subsequent death in this narrative, however, is offset by the roughly simultaneous resolution of many of the problems afflicting both parents' relations with their three children: a petty grudge between the father and the oldest son, the middle son's disinterest in finding a career and leaving home and the youngest daughter's histrionic teenage rebellions. Strikingly, it is particularly the daughter's (unplanned) pregnancy that appears to seal her restored relations with her mother, echoing sentimental flashback scenes of the latter's own pregnancy. Generational continuity and heritage is further underscored by a storyline in which the middle son learns his grandfather's trade. That this involves wine connoisseurship implicitly evokes the linkage between familial and national continuity.

While *Un air de famille* and *Le Premier jour* depict provincial middle-class families, *Tellement proches* is set for the most part in the frequently negatively constructed familial space of the Parisian suburbs – specifically around a huge modern Créteil block – and makes much of arduous journeys back and forth across the *périphérique* ring-road encircling the central metropolis. The film delights in humorous depiction of the awful chaos of life with young children. Reminiscent of hit Hollywood comedy *Parenthood* (Ron Howard, USA 1989), it is perhaps most noteworthy for extending the tropes of melodramatised masculinity to the terrain of fatherhood. In particular, despite its focus on several characters of both genders, it is Vincent Elbaz's Alain who appropriates the narrative through voiceover, which

⁴³ In addition to *Le premier jour*, further examples from the rom-com include *La Bûche* (see case study) and, more recently, *Je vais te manquer* (2009).

aligns audiences with him at the same time that his actions (ignoring long-suffering wife Nathalie when she tries to discuss their son's problems at school, flirting with a teenage babysitter and showing little impetus to find regular employment) are hard to endorse. It is interesting that despite his other failings Alain does maintain a relatively close relationship with his own father in this film. Indeed, Kaplan's comment that *Parenthood* explores different kinds of fathering and begs the question of why no equivalent film constructing various different constructions of motherhood exists also applies to the contemporary French context (1992: 199-200). Within *Tellement proches* itself the desire for motherhood – as well as female desire for romantic union itself – is instead belittled through the character of Nathalie's sister Roxane, a hysteric who chases men and steals babies. The end of this film, however, elides such difficulties to find all its couples some years on and Alain's bad son 'come good': having inherited his father's *métier* as an entertainer, he is putting on a show, watched by his parents with lachrymose pride.

Dissecting Divorce: *familles cassées et recomposées*

For Vincendeau (2008: 17), up to and including *Les Marmottes* in the early 1990s, it is adultery that provides the classic threat to the family. However, as extra-marital affairs lose their sting in a more permissive society, storytellers look further afield to figure familial vulnerability, and, in France, where a strong tradition of Cartesian rationalism combined with the contemporary politics of 'socialised medicine' has led to a culture of fascination with health, the medical theme has presented itself particularly readily.

However, several rom-coms deal too with the more obvious by-product of liberal values and the third major destabiliser of the nuclear family listed by

Vincendeau: divorce. *Les Marmottes* itself – as her discussion recognises – is one of these, through the inclusion of the narrative strand focusing Max's (G rard Lanvin) strained interaction with his ex-wife and the value he places on his relationship with his daughter. Indeed, Vincendeau here highlights the national cinema's increasing tendency to integrate children as part of its family groups and the paramount importance of children's welfare in depictions of *la famille recompos e*.⁴⁴ This would appear to bear out Badinter's recent argument that the global move to elevate children to a sacrosanct status is now slowly beginning to make its mark in France (Badinter 2010). The amplification of this focus in two very recent Paris-set comedies about divorce, *LOL* (2008) and *Une semaine sur deux* (2009), suggests the intensification of the trend year on year. Both these films – *LOL* especially – explore the relationship between a mother and her (pre-)teenage daughter (in the latter case she is twelve).⁴⁵ This is significant in view of the general absence of complex representations of the mother-daughter bond in dominant (male-oriented) representations of the family in global culture. Tarr and Rollet (2001:112-3) have noted the contrastingly recurrent probing of this relationship in films by French women directors in the 1980s and 1990s. These divorce films also coincide in splitting the narrative focus between parental and teenage romances, further widening their target audience – a strategy that paid dividends for *LOL*, which attracted over 3.5 million viewers. Such an approach contrasts, for example, with the privileging of adult needs in Nicole Garcia's 1990 divorce drama *Un week-end sur*

⁴⁴ This trend parallels a more extreme one identified by Kaplan in US cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, where not only is parenthood on the one hand elevated, partly as a reaction against the 'yuppie' values of the 1980s, but in several films about procreation the mother is dispensed with altogether to focus on the foetus itself as independently 'interpellated' (Kaplan 1996: 194-215).

⁴⁵ *Celle que j'aime/The One I Love* ( lie Chouraqui, France 2009) also frames a post-divorce family romance from a troubled child's point of view and *Divorces!* (Guignabodet, 2009) makes children's welfare a major factor in their warring parents' decision to call a truce.

deux/Every Other Weekend. It therefore mirrors the wider increase in French films focusing on children discernible since 1990 and identifiable with concern for their fate following the perceived failure of the traditional family, as popularised by Roudinesco's writings (see Powrie 2010: 60).⁴⁶

Une semaine announces its interest in the effects of family rupture particularly clearly with an opening that subverts the rom-com's common representation of the marriage ritual by presenting, instead, that of divorce. Shortly afterwards, a comic moment in which a schoolteacher tells pupils they now provide two reports for those with divorced parents, asks who needs two, and is faced with a sea of hands encompassing almost the entire class, extends the film's exploration of a social reality beyond the individual story. It is also noteworthy that divorce is now so commonplace as to have migrated from the more dramatic territory of *Un weekend sur deux* – or *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton, 1979) in the US – to become the stuff of comedy, as also in conversations between young protagonist Léa and a classmate whose parents are planning to remarry... each other! This is not to say that the film does not refract key issues about the effect of divorce upon children, as well as its significance for adults. While both Léa and her younger brother are constantly moving between residences, the focus on her experiences is signalled by her voiceover, connected frequently to internet chat forums or to a word-processed diary or blog. As the older child, Léa is able to exploit her parents' divorce for her own ends (she asks to spend more time with her father when her mother has punished her for sneaking out late at night); and it might be argued that her excessive investment in a romantic relationship is related to the absence of a stable home life.

⁴⁶ Cf. Palmer (2010) has recently observed that French cinema of the 2000s in general more often explores parenting than does American.

Léa's parents are presented in a conflicted way. Psychoherapist François continues in the trend for 'sensitive' but still insidiously sexist rom-com anti-heroes discussed in Chapter 3. Despite his benign appearance, his adultery broke up the marriage and during the narrative he indulges in a secret affair with Léa's (younger) piano teacher. Where François is associated with openness and softness, his ex-wife Marjorie (Mathilde Seigner) is presented as tough. Introductory shots show her at boxing practice and Léa's voiceover description of her here as 'a woman who's got it in for men' suggests the metonymic function of the punch-bag to which she administers an aggressive pounding. By contrast with François' romance, Marjorie's liaison with neighbour Jérôme fails, seemingly as he finds her too challenging – when he complains that men now have to cook if they want to eat well, she ripostes smartly that 'women have developed other skills'. Marjorie's refusal to conform to old-fashioned stereotypes of femininity (a trait whose association with Seigner's star persona was traced in Chapter 3), while constructed as problematic for her, is also championed in the film. A telling melodramatic scene where François and Jérôme, united in their failure to subjugate her, get drunk, weep and rail against her, casts them as pathetic, thanks to the comedy of François' drunken inability to pronounce properly the misogynist insult he attempts to level against her as a 'ballbreaker' (*castatrice*). Moreover, Marjorie's failed romance is posited as a function of the increased priority she accords to both her career in property and to motherhood. A celebration of her relationship with the children ousts a romantic climax, through shots of the three of them happily on holiday and a final image of Léa's and her mother's faces together, as also on the DVD cover and posters. Such a focus illustrates Shumway's (2003: 227) suggestion that the increased value placed on relationships with children in recent years coincides with the breakdown of other

social relations, including romantic ones. This kind of ending will reveal itself as common in the French rom-com throughout the remainder of this chapter. Here the pro-familial subtext is further conveyed by Léa's voiceover, reflecting that she used to feel she was in the wrong family but now feels lucky to have this one. This affirms the value of even Roudinesco's 'disarrayed' family.

While it is less explicitly predicated on the effects of divorce, focuses on a slightly older mother and daughter and excludes male perspectives altogether, Lisa Azuelos' *LOL* shares many features with *Une semaine*. This film's romantic focus is hinted at in its title. While Lol is the daughter character Lola's (Christa Theret) nickname, a subtitle reveals that it is also acronymic for the English phrase *laughing out loud*; but the latter in turn stems from a parodic twist on an abbreviation for the common English correspondence sign-off *lots of love*. An ostentatious style, including both rapid editing and an expressionistic approach to Lola's individual experience (at one point she nostalgically 'watches' herself with her ex-boyfriend Arthur) is well suited to a highly romantic discourse. Notably, the film neutralises any subversive suggestion that male-female friendships may provide an alternative to romance by converting Lola's best friend Maël rapidly to her love object. When this desire is finally satisfied, the event takes place one night in bed on a school trip to England, removed from the banality of ordinary life, and is discreetly presented and couched – as Lola's 'first time' – in terms of love. As in *Une semaine*, however, romances across the generations run side by side, inherently undermining the specialness of both. Thus, as Lola abandons last year's dalliance and falls in love for the first time, her mother Anne (Marceau) finally breaks it off with her ex-husband and embarks on a new relationship. The extreme parallelism is here highlighted by the concurrency between Anne's first night with another man and the loss of Lola's

virginity. Also as in *Une semaine*, and in harmony with the new preoccupation with children's experience, the daughter character in fact appropriates the voiceover. There is an echo here, too, of *Le Premier jour*, when the mother's reading of her daughter's diary creates a rift. Here, the illicitly read diary provides a neat metaphor for mothers' need to balance restraint and control: Anne wants to intervene in the life of a daughter whom she feels risks sexual precociousness but at first does not dare admit the disrespect she has shown in reading the diary. The exploration of such themes is made explicit through adult conversations in which Anne discusses the challenges of parenting and her own conflicted attitude towards female sexual liberation, which she finds to be a good idea in principle but more troubling in practice.

Interestingly, these conflicts of attitude are borne out in Lola's interactions with her schoolfriends, who form another surrogate family. When the teenager fraudulently claims to have been as sexually active as her (soon to be former) boyfriend Arthur, she is repeatedly labelled a slut (*pétasse*) by him, emphasising the persistence of a sexual double standard. Similarly, while Lola and her friends are portrayed as budding *séductrices* who sneak into sexy underwear unbeknown to parents – and best friend Charlotte in particular displays a rampant and perversely-oriented libido, as in a humorous scene she inserts a webcam into a chicken to pretend to masturbate for strangers online – their schoolyard enemy (and Lola's possible competitor for Maël's affections) Isabelle de Peyrefitte is referred to by them as a slut. While the portrayal of young women as active agents of desire is a welcome departure from traditions within both France and especially the global teenpic historically, the girls' attitude towards their peer provides a striking example of the powerfully divisive force of romantic rivalry between women, as well as of

female internalisation of misogynistic discourses. However, later in the film, female solidarity takes precedence over romance – notably contrasting with the male group’s dynamic – for example, where Lola and her friends defend de Peyrefitte when she is attacked by Arthur for wearing makeup whose production may have involved cruelty to animals. Female friendship is moreover a source of joy, laughter and comfort throughout the narrative (another rarity in the global teenpic, unlike with male buddy groups [Mar Azcona 2010: 91-4]).

Even more exuberantly championed, as in *Une semaine*, is the mother-daughter bond. Neither film shirks representing the difficulties this relationship can entail. In *Une semaine*, Léa’s blaming of Marjorie for her parents’ divorce, on the grounds that she failed to forgive her father’s cheating, displays a warped logic speaking of both the internalisation of unequal gendered models and also, perhaps, of straightforward Freudian mother-hatred. Certainly, the plot development that sees Marjorie put a stop to Léa’s night-time socialising and thus obstruct her progress towards adult womanhood through the relationship with schoolboy Hugo is a source of violent resentment. The boundaries of individual identities are made even more porous in *LOL* by the close parallelism of the mother’s and daughter’s sexual relationships and especially Lola’s habit of borrowing Anne’s clothes, signalling her encroachment onto her mother’s role of seductress. Maternal interference in her sexual development is also the first characteristic of Lola’s relationship with her mother depicted, as Anne disputes her daughter’s claim that shaving her pubic hair is nobody’s business but her own, while it is such unwanted interference that later prompts her to opt to live temporarily with her father. At the end of this film, though, once again the mother-daughter union takes the place of any romantic one, as the pair lie gossiping together in bed. Moreover, the narrative’s cyclical teenage time,

marked by a final act which returns to the same moment as the start of the film, the beginning of the school term, and echoing the opening sequence's break-up between Lola and Arthur by showing imperfections creeping into the relationship with Maël, illustrates by contrast the endurance of the maternal relationship.

As indicated, Anne's character presents contradictions from a feminist perspective. The first image of her is one of idealised 'natural' motherhood, as she bathes unhurriedly with her younger daughter. This is borne out in the rest of the film through her prioritisation of relationships with her children and her success, for the most part, in maintaining good relations even with the volatile Lola, through a liberal style of parenting. Casting is again crucial to Marceau's role here as the archetypal 'cool Mum'. The actress' recent work has been something of a return to her grass roots in popular national cinema, when *La Boum/Ready For Love* (Claude Pinoteau, 1980) made her a child star. Lately she has appeared in the inherently sympathetic roles of nurse (*Nelly* [Laure Duthilleul, 2004]), invalid (*L'Homme de chevet* [Alain Monne, 2007]), and frequently of 'sexy' and youthful mother (also in rom-coms *Je Reste!*, *De l'autre côté du lit* [Pascale Pouzadoux, 2008] and *Un bonheur n'arrive jamais seul*). In this latter role, she appears, too, on the cover of *Elle* magazine's May 2010 special edition dedicated to exploring the current social condition of women. The interview with real-life divorcee Marceau – photographed in a simple white T-shirt and trousers, with short hair and minimalist makeup – focuses on juggling work and child-rearing (Anon 2010c: 134-7). While this struggle is negotiated in *De l'autre côté du lit*, discussed later in this chapter, this raises a salient point with regard to the image of motherhood Anne offers in *LOL*, i.e. her lack of career. Indeed, despite a glancing reference to the fact she has an architecture degree, the same introductory bath scene appears if anything to promote her frivolity, as

when her daughter asks her what her favourite subject is, using the French word *matière*, also meaning *material*, and her answer is the charmingly insouciant: ‘Cashmere, darling.’ With her three children, Anne conforms to the schema elaborated by Neil Gilbert for the USA, according to which even highly educated women rarely combine even part-time work with more than two children (2008: 31-2). In this case, of course, Anne’s situation is further complicated by her status as a single mother. While the practical challenges of mothering itself (as when Anne has no time to shower before driving Lola to school) and especially of balancing this with time for a new relationship (she turns up unwashed for a date after losing track of time reading Lola’s diary) are reflected in the film, this is not complemented by any suggestion of a desire for a career. In this respect, the film shows no progress away from the model of pre-millennial US cinema, indicted by Kaplan for failing to depict women who combine motherhood with both sexual and professional fulfilment. In view of Marjorie’s failed relationship in *Une semaine*, the same might be said of that film. The difference, though, is that Calbérac’s film makes the issue a subject of conflict rather than skirting it. A reference in Léa’s closing voiceover to her mother’s view that she may be ready for a relationship next year at least keeps alive the possibility of a reconciliation of all three of these spheres of feminine experience – something of a Holy Grail for feminist thinkers. As Kaplan remarked in response to the absence of such representations globally from her study two decades earlier: “‘Sex, Work, and Motherhood’ is evidently [a] threatening [...] combination on a number of levels.’ (1992: 183)

These analyses show, then, how an ensemble architecture (in the variety of forms this takes) in rom-com lends itself at once to prescription and description of familial

instability. This is borne out thematically by a number of films of the period, whether they critique the nuclear family from within or depict families post-divorce. Films by women directors in particular question the benefits of familial structures, although this genre by its nature also highlights positives in the family as basic social cell, albeit one that finds itself subject to new configurations in the postmodern age. For divorce, in these narratives, is not constructed as wholly inimical to romance, familial or otherwise; rather, the genre mirrors society itself in finding ways to reconcile its advent with its other overarching discourses, while to greater or lesser degrees acknowledging the difficulties this implies. It is also worth flagging up the extent to which the post-divorce rom-coms end up being films which deal substantially with parenthood and, above all, motherhood – the vast majority of children from broken homes in France, as elsewhere, still spend live with their mothers. This is an appropriate point at which to turn to the maternal question and its treatment across French rom-com as a whole.

THE MUMMY MYTH

The motherhood position may have been more fetishised than any other in human history. Its elevation in the service of patriarchy is well known at least since *The Second Sex* (1949) and has become a commonplace of cultural studies since Foucault's (1984) work on the subject. For film studies, the definitive text is Kaplan's already cited 1992 study, in which the writer analyses a century of US (almost always male-authored) representations of motherhood collapsed into the dichotomy of idealised self-sacrificing angel versus unnatural 'witch'. These two images, erected with the clear goal of keeping the mother at home, are for Kaplan identifiable with a 'modern motherhood discourse' born in eighteenth-century

France with the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, in her final chapter dealing with the postmodern era, Kaplan notes the impact of the disassociation of the maternal process from the female body, through cultural developments around surrogacy and in particular major advances in reproductive technologies. For her, such developments had, by the 1980s, made the female body a site of contestation, with women rediscovering the pleasures of motherhood because the latter is no longer 'viewed as an automatic, natural part of [their] life-cycle' (1992: 180-219; 181).

Interestingly, much of the impetus for this discursive shift can be located in French philosophy, in the works of feminist philosophers Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, all of whom attempt to appropriate motherhood away from (patriarchal) society and re-inscribe it as a personal experience that in some way defines the feminine.⁴⁷ It should be emphasised that these writers' theories represent only one current within third wave feminism – and one which is particularly visible from the outside perspective of Anglophone writers, given its lack of equivalent in British and American culture. Equally important to bear in mind are the obvious changes to the status of motherhood brought about by the mass availability of contraception from after the 1960s. Badinter (2010: 83-4) is perhaps overstating the issue when she alleges that in the space of less than a decade between the late 1970s and the early 1980s feminist theory did a one hundred and eighty degree turn away from Beauvoir's culturalist approach. Nonetheless, the existence of this strand of thought is highly significant and surely an important factor in France's high birth rate and pro-natalism. Feminists' championing of motherhood also highlights its conflicted

⁴⁷ See for example Kristeva (1986: 298).

ideological status, as resumed by Kaplan with the incisive question: ‘Since patriarchy wants women to want children [...] how can a woman distinguish her desire for the child from that imposed on her?’ (1992: 4). Badinter herself has argued convincingly that, in the French press in the early 2000s, motherhood is idealised in a way that is beneficial to patriarchy (2003: 200) and that a major neo-Rousseauist move to re-naturalise maternity today is closing off women’s choices, in particular the possibility of combining motherhood and work (2010).

Eternal Mothers

Given their availability for exploitation to both feminist and patriarchal ends, it is unsurprising that discourses idealising maternity arise frequently in French cinema across the board. Specifically, the maternal resolution is a staple of the national cinema. On this subject, Tarr and Rollet observed in 2001 that ‘[in] the last year of the millennium a number of films by women end with pregnancy or childbirth, as if to affirm women’s commitment to an unknown and uncertain future’ (120). This explanation leaves room for further interpretation in light of the frenzied mythologising of motherhood set out above. The present discussion will attempt to unpick the significance of certain trends in the representations of maternity in French rom-com.

Deferring for a moment the question of the ending, maternal desire arises fairly frequently in the genre. In addition to the example of *Tellement proches*, *Les Marmottes* and *Ce soir je dors chez toi* both depict female characters who are largely defined by the desire to procreate. In *Les Marmottes*, this borders on the pathological, as one character, Marie-Claire, does nothing but badger her husband Stéphane to impregnate her and feigns suicide by jumping out of a window naked

into the freezing snow in order to reinforce her demands. In *Tellement proches*, attempts by a young woman, Roxane, to steal a baby arguably fall more in line with a narrative pattern discussed by Tarr and Rollet in two films by women, Danièle Dubroux's *Border Line* (1992) and Claire Simon's *Sinon, oui* (1997), which 'expose and problematize the ideological pressures on women to consider motherhood as women's destiny by presenting childless women who resort to crime in order to preserve the fiction of their assumed, false identities as mothers' (2001: 124). *Tellement proches* is not, though, concerned to the same extent with any problematisation of these pressures – rather, Roxane is largely a madcap figure of humour. Both she and Marie-Claire in *Les Marmottes* in fact suggest that the stereotype of the hysterical proto-mother has become a target of mockery.

My analyses of *Les Marmottes* and *Tellement proches* suggest that the caricatured hysterical proto-mother can be read in a Jamesonian fashion, as revealing in ways that surpass authorial intention. Indeed, it is not trivial that the directors of these two films conveying the pressure on women to become mothers – a pressure that spans the two decades covered by this thesis, as the films were released in 1993 and 2008 – are men. The unsympathetic attitude is achieved through a lack of alignment of the point of view with the female characters in question. This is striking in *Les Marmottes*, where we are formally positioned with Marie-Claire's partner Stéphane inside their bedroom when he is momentarily terrified by her apparently jumping to her death out of a window (although the ground outside the window turns out actually to be only a couple of metres down). In *Tellement proches*, Roxane's unreasonable behaviour is simply not explained. By contrast, the divorce narratives *LOL* and *Une semaine* (as well as, in a more secondary way, *Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches* and *Je vais te manquer*) depict mother-daughter relationships from the

inside, thus avoiding what Leahy, paraphrasing Kaplan, has recently described as the traditional ‘othering’ of the mother. As Leahy comments, ‘[w]hile representations of maternal subjectivity may now be more common than when Kaplan was writing, they are still far from frequent’. The examples she offers are films by auteurs, both male and female (Philippe Claudel, Régis Wargnier, Krzysztof Kieslowski and Sandrine Veysset) (2010: 163). Taking romantic comedy into consideration suggests a stronger link between female authorship and interest in the experience of motherhood.

However, the fact that *Une semaine sur deux* is directed by a man, Ivan Calbérac (whose interest, albeit problematic, in female experience has been discussed in Chapter 2), reflects the pitfalls of essentialism. I am particularly wary of tying arguments too closely to directors’ gender, given the cooperative nature of filmmaking; indeed, I have stressed the possible significance of women’s input as screenwriters – including Thompson on *Les Marmottes*. Nonetheless, it appears significant that time and again male authors depict women’s desire to reproduce – especially when this is pathologised.

Despite the acknowledged limitations of films’ resolutions as a criterion for assessing all their ideological affiliations, these nonetheless obviously stake a certain claim to the status of narratives’ goals, at the very least in a temporal sense, and in French rom-com they often include children. Before examining parental resolutions, it should perhaps be noted that – in line with both the general elevation of childhood today and the genre’s more conservative tendencies – babies do appear from time to time at the end of rom-coms globally. However, this feature is much more common in France. More importantly, a tendency for making reproduction pivotal to the plot resolution is discernible in the French genre. It is one thing for a film like *Nothing*

Hill (Roger Michell, UK/USA 1999) to simply include a baby in its flash-forward idyllic final vision of the couple united. This also occurs in such French exemplars as *Au suivant!* and *Ce soir je dors chez toi*. Similarly, pregnancies or children feature in the endings of *Romuald et Juliette*, *L'Art (délicat) de la séduction*, *Mariage mixte*, *Ensemble c'est tout*, *Celle que j'aime* and *Je vais te manquer*. More remarkable, though, is the fact that in several French rom-coms it is the prospect or arrival of a baby that binds a previously nonexistent or antagonistic couple. In *Célibataires*, for example, it is when his friend Nelly mentions being artificially inseminated by one of her male friends that protagonist Ben decides to seduce her. The fact that Nelly accepts Ben's advances, in the absence of earlier hints that she may harbour romantic feelings for him, presents coupling as a means to avoid 'unnatural' single parenthood. In *Mensonges et trahisons*, although Raphaël's decision to return to Muriel precedes his realisation that she is pregnant, the labour ward setting of the reunion cements their newfound intimacy, as does the scene from the epilogue which shows them sleeping with the baby at their side.

Another subgroup of rom-coms effects a similar move, with the slight variation that the baby in question is not the direct progeny of the couple. I suggested in Chapter 3 how the endings of *Gazon maudit* and *Pédale douce* queer the French family around the arrival of a new baby. In *L'Ex-femme de ma vie/The Ex-Wife of My Life* (Balasko, 2004), Nina is reconciled with her ex-husband Tom while pregnant (by another man) and the dialogue hints that their divorce stemmed from their failure to have children. One storyline in *Je vais te manquer* presents a woman suffering from infertility, which is constructed as deeply distressing, before attempting to 'heal the wound' by pairing her off with a man who already has a child. More recently, *Prête-moi ta main* (2006) is the only film in the corpus which

goes one step further, by representating dislocations in the maternal process, a trend discussed by Kaplan in an American context. In this case it does so through the transnational theme of adoption, a phenomenon that has led to the globalisation of the ‘most private and local social unit’ of the family (Brysk 2004: 167). However, its inclusion appears more a function of plot expediency than a reflection of profound interest in the social or psychological impact of adopting children: Emma agrees to continue posing as Luis’ fiancée since the patriarchal legitimacy the engagement lends her will strengthen her bid for a child. Not only does this force the mismatched couple into close proximity but the adoption itself catalyses a thaw in relations between them. While Emma is outwardly caustic, moments of reflective solitude, notably in scenes showing her lovingly restoring furniture, create an impression of hidden sensitivity and the unexplained desire for a child – which we learn was strong enough to break up her previous, otherwise happy relationship – completes her mystification and feminisation. Even more striking is Luis’ transformation, from self-styled cynic to overgrown lovelorn adolescent. Although the narrative sets up his growing interest in Emma earlier, it is the accidental viewing of footage of her potential adoptee which turns Luis dewy-eyed and immediately precedes a montage showing him heart-sick in Emma’s absence, using his skills as a perfume-maker to attempt to (re-)create her smell. The two plot lines of (adoptive) maternity and romance are collapsed together in an ending that joins the couple to succeed in adopting the boy. Interestingly, the scene in which the adoption agency approves their bid, as though to compensate for the displacement of physical maternity in its main plot, sees the pregnant agency employee go into labour herself. I have already highlighted the conservatism of *Prête-moi*’s new romantic endorsement of a conventional notion of the female character ‘snaring’ an initially unwilling male as a

partner. This retrograde momentum is redoubled by the narrative's inscription of romance as integration into conventional social order, making Emma and Luis' deeply un-sexy union answer to desire on the part of his matriarchal family – in front of whom it is largely played out – to see him married.

A number of rom-com resolutions realign procreation more overtly with paternal desire. Particularly striking are the endings of *Pédale douce* and *Mauvaise foi*, which heighten their construction of the male perspective of procreation as sacrosanct by exploiting the classic narrative device of the deadline structure, building their climaxes around a father's race against time to prevent his partner aborting.⁴⁸ The pattern of tension then release generated by the narratives in each case cues us to welcome the outcomes, which see the unborn children 'saved' and with them their parents' relationships. On reflection, though, the fact that these stories show mothers literally poised to undergo the abortion procedure suggests the serious challenges posed by the circumstances of each birth. In *Pédale douce*, it is gay Adrien and not the baby's incorrigibly womanising biological father Alexandre, at this point out of the picture, who persuades Eva not to abort the child, then assumes its paternity. In *Mauvaise foi*, following bitter feuding around cultural differences relating to their ethnicities as, respectively, Arab and Jew, Ismaël and Clara have also separated and are disputing until he learns of her plans to abort and rushes to the hospital. As in *Pédale douce*, the narrative cuts directly to shots of the couple bonding over their baby, avoiding many of the difficult issues that have until now come between them.

⁴⁸ *Tout pour plaire* also includes a missed abortion appointment but without a deadline structure.

In Chapter 2 I suggested that marriage was overall less significant in the contemporary French rom-com than the more provisional commitments associable with the discourse of intimacy. Reproduction represents one narrative strategy to achieve such a state of affairs. The terms of the old-fashioned, clichéd resolution (borrowed for the title of Attal's film) '*ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d'enfants*', or 'they got married and had lots of children' – already interestingly different from the English equivalent 'and they lived happily ever after' – are reversed in many of the films discussed in this section, since parenthood precedes or precipitates long-term commitment. The fact that this arrangement can nonetheless preserve patriarchal order is underlined by patronymic themes in more than one film. One of the questions over which Clara and Ismaël of *Mauvaise foi* fall out concerns the baby's name, with Ismaël threatening to insist on Abdelkrim, because he says it is traditional in his culture that sons take their paternal grandfather's name. This also occurs in a significant secondary plot in *Ma femme est une actrice*, where Yvan's Jewish sister finally imposes her own choice of Moïse (Moses) on her son, despite her gentile husband's reluctance. As such feminists as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) have argued, the heterosexual marriage plot turns on a partnership between two sets of men.⁴⁹ Fiona Handyside (2007: 223-4) has more recently remarked on the French obsession with 'the name of the father', evidenced by the debate around legislation in 2002 overturning the automatic bestowing of the father's name on legitimate offspring. The importance of patriarchal exchange is very apparent in *Mauvaise foi*, where problems arise initially when Ismaël fails to charm not Clara but her family, spearheaded by her father.

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Cf. Shumway (2003: 12) observes that New Comedy, based on the exchange of women, is probably the ur-story of romantic discourse.

It is also no accident that in both these cases the children in question are male. Even in the tradition of Judaism, where the woman's role in generational continuity is valued, it is as a progenitor for the male representatives of the group. Although it does not include a racial dimension, the same point is also implicit in the ending of *Mensonges et trahisons*, where Raphaël is overjoyed to be able to name the son Muriel has produced for him. In fact, with the exception of *Gazon maudit*, in every one of these films that end after the birth or adoption of a single child and where its sex is known, they are sons – in direct contrast with the 1980s celebration of girls (usually alongside feminine utopian space as a whole) in such films as *Le Jupon Rouge/Manuela's Loves* (Geneviève Lefebvre, 1987) and the Franco-Italian co-production *Speriamo che sia femmina/Let's Hope It's a Girl* (Mario Monicelli, 1986) (or much earlier *Club de femmes/Girls' Club* [Jacques Deval, 1936]).

It is worth considering the authorship of films with maternal resolutions. In pre-2000 rom-com production I have argued that – along with gay director Gabriel Aghion's *Pédale douce* – the major female auteur hits *Romuald et Juliette* and *Gazon maudit* chose to leave tensions between their main characters neutralized alongside, if not thanks to, the arrival of a child. However, it is remarkable that those post-2000 rom-coms that effect a similar move are almost all directed by men. These include *Ma femme est une actrice* (Attal, 2001), *Mensonges et trahisons et plus si affinités...* (Tirard, 2004), *Mauvaise foi* (Zem, 2006), *Ce soir je dors chez toi* (Baroux, 2007), and, just outside the decade, *Une folle envie* (Bernard Jeanjean, 2011). 'Feminine' candidates for such a simplistic resolution prove considerably less totalising: in Balasko's *L'Ex-femme de ma vie* the pregnancy is not cast as pivotal to Nina and Tom's reconciliation; in *Au suivant!* (Biras, 2005), a baby is one detail of the film's final flash-forward vision of the central couple's idyllic partnership; and in

one of several storylines in both *Tout pour plaire* (Telerman, 2005) and *Toi et moi* (Lopes-Curval, 2006) a character has a baby at the end – although it is noteworthy that in the latter film it is explicit (and in the former assumed) that the mother has kept her job. This issue is either ignored in the male-authored films, or, in *Ma femme est une actrice* – a film that I have argued is centrally concerned with the burning tension between female professional success and male desire to subjugate women – actively thrown into doubt, as the female lead ignores news about a starring role in Hollywood in favour of posing with a cushion under her jumper. The fact that her husband at this moment catches sight of his own reflection multiplied in facing mirrors underscores male domination, at the levels of both narrative interest and power relations, at the end of the film. The contrasting perspective offered by *Toi et moi* tallies with the high numbers of working mothers in France. Although motherhood endures as a central concern in recent rom-coms, then, the fact that in this traditionally pro-family genre women should of late be more circumspect about simplistic maternal resolutions – and men’s frantic promulgation of them – suggests the increasing reach of a feminist discourse based on equality.

Renegotiating Roles

Where the films discussed in the preceding section portray motherhood as all-consuming and, generally, all-important, at least the presence of the father in and around delivery rooms or asleep in the same bedroom as wife and baby attests to a degree of change in the level of fathers’ involvement with their offspring in relation to former eras. A handful of rom-coms go further, assuming the presence of children as a given and addressing the possibility of a more substantially equal negotiation of child-raising between the two parents.

By their nature, the rom-coms about divorce *Une semaine* and *LOL* explore fathering to an extent; however, in both cases paternal care is presented as inferior to that offered by the mother. In *LOL* Lola's decision to live with her father Alain – a secondary character – is in fact all about punishing her mother for questioning her maturity. His solipsistic refusal to adapt his cooking to her tastes contrasts with the way in which her mother has tailored her entire existence around the children. Continuing in the psychoanalytic mode, this film here enacts a trajectory mapped by Irigaray (1981), where, sated with the mother's nurturing, the daughter turns to the father, who gives her space but leaves her empty inside. Worse, a scene in which Alain privileges jealous probing about his ex-wife's love-life over serious discussion of Lola's discipline and scholastic problems casts him as a bad parent. While François of *Une semaine* is considerably more solicitous about the welfare of his two children, who regularly spend time with him, he too compromises his relationship with them by clandestinely sleeping with Léa's piano teacher, causing emotional upset for her when the secret comes out. The contrast between the reversed hierarchies of romance and parenting for mother and father in each film is stark.

Several films portray more nurturing fathers, as in secondary storylines presenting positive (divorced/separated) father-child relationships in *Irène* (2002) and *Je vais te manquer* (2009). In *Irène*, it is made clear that this character trait informs the broody heroine's attraction towards decorator François. Although his baby son is mainly a background presence, François is portrayed as a devoted father and parental responsibility is shown on occasion to intrude directly on their courtship. Moreover, a rift in his relationship with Irène follows her realisation of his ongoing involvement with and feelings for his ex, which are presented as difficult to extricate from their joint parental status. In this case, an open ending in which the

couple remains on good terms but not explicitly in a relationship refuses to ignore these complexities.

Nurturing qualities also form part of the appeal of the male leads in *Le Bison (et sa voisine Dorine)* (2003), *Au suivant!* (2005), *Essaye-moi* (Pierre-François Martin-Laval, 2006) and *Si c'était lui* (2007). Only *Au suivant!* presents an actual father-child relationship, between Bernard (Clovis Cornillac) and his daughter. The film accommodates Cornillac's penchant for extrovert physical comedy by making him a performer, in a story that pairs him with casting director Jo. It is his status as a widowed single father that lends his otherwise wacky character psychological depth and is crucial in prompting Jo to reassess her initial judgement of him as an oddball. Visiting him at home, she finds him sparing no effort in preparing a birthday party for his daughter and his sunny, life-filled suburban garden contrasts strongly with Jo's apartment, which she refers to as a luxury but which, in its minimalist design and muted decor, remains sterile. This apartment also provides a humorous focal point for the film's promotion of family life as a barricade against the physical vulnerability of female singlehood, when Jo meets a Kosovan refugee in a bar and allows him to stay the night with her, then finds herself locked out. This contrasts strongly with Bernard's characterisation as protective, as when he puts her to bed drunk and, rather than taking advantage of the situation, sits up sewing her torn clothes: a perfect incarnation of the father figure/domestic god archetype, harking back to 1980s ideals of new masculinity and frequent in Hollywood rom-coms today (Burns 2011: 17). Both *Le Bison* and *Si c'était lui* have their male lead assume a paternal role towards the offspring of the female protagonist, which is in both cases constructed as equally beneficial to the grown men in question: an irresponsible hedonist and a vagrant respectively. Once again a well-known comic, Baer, inhabits

the paternal role in the first film, blending comedian and romantic comedy to make the link between a talent for parenting and the indefatigably enthusiastic and childish comic sensibility. This linkage is even more heavily underscored in *Essaye-moi*, whose style as a whole is governed by a cartoonish aesthetic reminiscent of early Warner Brothers. Thus the slapstick physical behaviour associated with Yves-Marie (Martin-Laval) is paired with visual imagery that defies the laws of physics, such as when the romantic (anti-)hero falls through a door and leaves a man-shaped hole behind him. Although neither of the main characters in this film has a child of their own, they ‘adopt’ one belonging to a neighbour for the day, and Martin-Laval exploits the close-up to emphasise the fact that it is when Yves-Marie bonds with the boy that the face of his love-object Jacqueline (Julie Depardieu, infantilised in A-line dresses with curled hair) first begins to register approval (Yves-Marie’s relationship with his own father, played by veteran comic star Pierre Richard, is also an important plot element).

In *Essaye-moi* the wondrous dimension of romance is inseparable from that of childhood, as underlined by a prologue set during the couple’s tender years, and which establishes the narrative’s improbable premise that Yves-Marie has spent 20 years becoming an astronaut in order to oblige Jacqueline to fulfil a promise to marry him on the condition that he go to the moon. There is in fact a remarkable absence of sexual tension in all three of the comedian rom-coms described above. In *Au suivant!*, the ending replaces the classic kiss with shots of the couple, with Bernard’s daughter and their new baby in tow, joking around. In *Le Bison*, more extremely, the two leads’ relationship is not predicated explicitly on romance at all. Dorine is the older concierge in the building inhabited by the wealthy Louis (Baer), whose antisocial hours and habit of playing loud music in the flat next door to Dorine’s

family have earned him the nickname ‘the bison’. When Dorine’s husband, a boorish trucker played by Martin-Laval, leaves her penniless, saddled with four children and eight months pregnant, to run off with his mistress, Louis is forced by circumstance to step into the breach and help her out with her children. Despite the lack of sexual chemistry here, the couple’s relationship enacts familiar rom-com conventions, as they bicker but he also takes the role of knight in shining armour to ‘save’ her from destitution, including by finding her a lawyer to pursue her ex. Their ‘romance’ also bridges class differences, erasing the proletarian status of the concierge (a recent trend, also in evidence in *Le Hérisson/The Hedgehog* [Mona Achache, 2009]), who is played by the film’s director, famous comedienne Isabelle Nanty. At the end of the film, Louis, transformed into a responsible caregiver, is clearly enchanted by Dorine’s new son and the final scene sees the entire gang drive off together into the distance. As well as constructing nurturing father figures, these films go one step further than having parenthood catalyse romance: in them, the ideal of family life supplants any interest in attraction or passion altogether.

Issues around children are, though, obviously more likely to arise in rom-coms about couples who are already together. In one storyline in ensemble rom-com *Tout pour plaire*, Florence loses an important contract at her job in advertising when her son falls ill and her husband refuses to cancel his business trip. This is one of a series of events leading up to her decision to leave him. *Ils se marièrent* itself also touches on the role of childcare in provoking marital difficulties in an early scene. When wayward Yvan leaves his wife Charlotte – who also works as an estate agent – to go and play poker with his male coterie, she points out reasonably that she too would like to go out with her friends. However, not only does Yvan go out anyway, and is – in contrast to the female-authored *Tout pour plaire* – duly forgiven by his

wife; after flirting with a concern for this broadly feminine problem, the film abandons the question in favour of a focus on the more frivolous issue of adultery, constructed from a male perspective (see also Chapter 2).

The film that explores most fully the possibility of repositioning the genders with regard to childcare and family organisation, *De l'autre côté du lit* (2008), does so in an ostensibly light-hearted mode. This effect is achieved through a high concept plot, in which a husband and wife swap roles, and a style which, by contrast with ensemble films' typical preference for unobtrusive naturalism, embraces a more Hollywood approach to narrating rom-com. Salient formal features include rapid editing; frequent montages; music that relentlessly reinforces mood; self-conscious camerawork and staging, designed to focus readers' attention on particular details; a pastel colour scheme, including wife Ariane's pink car; and an expressive approach to mise-en-scène altogether. For example, despite the film's superficial distance from reality, the mise-en-scène of the couple's home – undergoing refurbishments – draws attention to their emblematic modernity. Unlike traditional French homes, the flat-fronted, flat-roofed new-build is constructed around an open-plan interior complete with shelves, breakfast bar and other fittings painted in various bright shades to look as artificial as possible. Its cacophony of unnatural colours and geometric designs, also reminiscent of a sitcom set (director Pouzadoux's background is as a television actress), pastiches a certain kind of twenty-first century decor. Its layout, moreover, figures visually the narrative themes of a lack of clear delineation of territory.

Based on a novel by Alix Girod de l'Ain, the film immediately advertises its focus on femininity by aligning the narrative with working mother Ariane (Marceau), as her opening voiceover describes a life plagued by guilt. A rapid montage mimicking the frenetic pace of her own life then shows her attempting to

juggle motherhood with her job as a jeweller and running a house which is currently undergoing refurbishment. As in *LOL*, released the same year, Marceau's character disports thrown-on clothes and unkempt hair as she drops her children at school with no gym kit or time to spare for more than a rueful, anxious wave, and in this film the comedy is amped up further as, in haste en route, she catches her foot on a loose wire and falls flat on her face. Scenes at home or work, in the car or at the supermarket alike, comically dramatise failure and imperfection. This opening sequence provides, in short, a *mise-en-scène* of the conflicted position of mothers today who are, in Badinter's formulation, trapped between the two identities of woman and mother: 'Guilty, inevitably guilty [...] Tested by conflictual challenges, both mother and woman feel that they are fighting a losing battle' (2010: 191).

It is noteworthy, with regard to the opposition of motherhood and womanhood, in the sense of adult female desire and self-construction as desirable to men, that the same montage also includes a humorous fantasised flashback to a primitive era, which can be productively compared with a similar one featuring in the opening sequence of the male-authored *Mensonges et trahisons*. The earlier film's fantasy belonged to a male character, again signalled by voiceover, and presented a caveman knocking out his mate before having sex with her as an appealingly straightforward alternative to the circumlocutions of contemporary courtship. In *De l'autre côté*, Ariane's fantasy comes surprisingly close to this predecessor. Introduced by her euphemistic reflection that 'we don't even have time to have fun like before', the scene shows her as a squaw awaiting the return of her hunter-gatherer husband Hugo (Dany Boon), who is 'strong, brave, solid, muscular... the type of man you can count on', with enthusiastic licks to his face. Badinter has again pointed out that the demands placed on mothers today leave little time for

sexuality, for her the ‘glue’ of today’s fragile couples (ibid: 159). Ariane’s fantasy suggests that nostalgia for a time of greater differentiation between gender roles is not the prerogative of men. Although Boon’s high-voiced, gentle and sensitive comic star persona encodes the sequence as humorous, underlining the impossibility of previous ideals of masculinity now, this interlude nonetheless points up the fact that the identities that women wish to occupy in the private and public spheres can be far from coterminous.

Returning the action to the latter of these spheres, comedy’s more natural territory, Ariane soon masterminds a more progressive solution. Following her instigation of an exchange of roles, there ensues a high comic celebration and subversion of many of the oldest clichés of gender. Before their swap, Ariane and Hugo have occupied what might be described as neo-traditional roles in their couple. That is, as is relatively common in France today, Ariane works but – as her desire to change places with her husband proves – her job is presented as only one aspect of her life and not the source of personal fulfilment. Although she occupies a senior post as co-manager of a business, the fact that this is a jewellery workshop circumscribes her in the conventionally feminine spheres of fashion and craft. This leaves hot-shot businessman (as her voiceover describes him) Hugo to retain the role of main breadwinner. This state of affairs bears out my arguments in Chapter 3 about the construction of women’s work as superfluous in rom-com. It also allows Hugo to burden his wife with more than her fair share of other conjugal responsibilities. Such an arrangement links the findings of studies carried out in France and elsewhere, which show that the vast majority of domestic work still falls to women (Shelton and John 1993; Régnier-Loilier 2009), to contemporary work patterns. In other words, it suggests the stringent demands of many jobs today may be countervailing the

cultural shift that has seen fathers' increased willingness to be involved in their children's upbringing.

Following the swap, Ariane and Hugo discover they can do each other's jobs better than their own. On the one hand, each becomes a parodic version of the other's gender, recalling Butler's invocation of parody as a means to 'reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalised gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic and mimetic – a failed copy' (1999: 186). Thus Ariane takes a colleague out for lunch and eats and drinks him under the table as a measure of her strength and vigour, before throwing up in private. She also seduces a male colleague for physical amusement, although her manipulation of the latter, and her ulterior motive of facilitating working relations, inverts rather than entirely shakes off what Mary Anne Doane (1987: 40), invoking Joan Rivière, has referred to as the 'masquerade' of femininity, where women exaggerate aspects of gender to control others and achieve particular goals. Hugo, meanwhile, dons a pink shirt, sips tea delicately and feigns a love of romance novels to make his jewellery sales, with Boon's star image and effeminate performance style adding to the camp [Figure 15]. On the other hand, each character's success in the other's role depends on elements of their original identity. Ariane's experience as a woman allows her to come up with the marketing coup of complementing Hugo's company's tool-production with a service offering muscular young men to help female customers use the products (subverting woman's classic position as fetishised feminine object), while business-brain Hugo strategises a reordering of the workshop to maximize the jewellery enterprise's productivity. The obvious interpretation of this utopian schema is a call for greater sharing of men and women's responsibilities within the family.



Figure 15: Dany Boon camps up the role-reversal in *De l'autre côté du lit*

Despite its overt simplicity, the film recognises the external pressure to conform to familiar identities, as Ariane's mother tries to undermine the couple's arrangement and their son – who has said he would prefer them simply to divorce like other parents – vandalises his classroom. More crucially for the main plot, Ariane herself begins to question her newfound identity because of the distance it introduces between her and the children. A scene in which she leaves the office to join them on the beach and wades into the sea in her work clothes to scoop them up reduces her to a clichéd glorification of motherhood as elemental. The fact that it is concern for the children which puts paid to adult desire to chart new territories in family organisation indicates again the increased focus on children visible elsewhere in the rom-com and in French cinema in general of late.⁵⁰ The film's ending overlooks the details of the couple's final compromise in its celebration of their love, but the fact that Hugo sweeps their daughter out of harm's way while Ariane puts out a fire with masterful ease – unlike in an early scene – implies that a more even

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The same move occurs in romantic drama *Happy Few* (Antony Cordier, 2010).

distribution of the work of family life has been the route to saving their marriage. In this light the film can be seen as a call for both a better balance of work and family life and for more equal distribution of labour between parents. In the latter respect, it suggests there is still much territory for women to gain.⁵¹

If maternity recurs often in French cinema, it is so frequently invoked in rom-com as to constitute one of the national genre's specificities. Sometimes maternal desire is pathologised in films by men. Most common, though, are celebratory resolutions around maternity. A few films do introduce complexities into this picture, usually from a female perspective, but the overall narrative drive is towards a renewal cast as positive. It is worth noting that maternity, rather than parenthood, remains the key term. This might appear unsurprising in view of the particularities of the French feminist philosophical tradition. Interestingly, however, in the 2000s especially, this is most often the case in films by men, which, in conjunction with the decline of such straightforward conclusions in female-authored texts, suggests the increased reach of ideas about equality as opposed to feminine specificity.

What is striking, in relation to contemporary social trends - at least perceived - is the broad absence of nurturing fathers in the rom-com. Not only is the presence of such characters generally limited to single fathers (*Une semaine sur deux*, *Irène*, *Au suivant!*) or men who 'dabble' in fatherhood with surrogate children in comedian-focused, non-naturalistic texts (*Essaye-moi*, *Le Bison*), this trait tends to function as a marker of the characters' attractiveness to women as much as a feature of their own portrayal. Narratives focusing on two parents speak more of conflict and female resentment in this area (*Ils se marièrent*, *Tout pour plaire*), suggesting the greater

⁵¹ A condensed version of the preceding two subsections appears in Harrod (2012).

onus on fathers today to become involved with their children, but framed as a problematic, unresolved change. *De l'autre côté du lit* does present a father who finds he enjoys parenting temporarily but this impulse is still thwarted by external pressures to conform to a conventional social order that is broadly restored at the end of the film. Certainly the utopian vision of Serreau's *Trois hommes et un couffin* appears somewhat dead in the water.

Similarly, there is no evidence in this genre of the dislocation of the maternal process through technological advances and nor is there a single film in this corpus that explicitly presents a couple who are childless by choice, despite the global rise of this model. The French rom-com, then, on the whole reflects and ratifies the nation's attachment to individuation between the genders and in particular to keeping parenthood firmly the dominion of mothers.

CASE STUDY: *La Bûche/Season's Beatings* (Danièle Thompson, 1999)

Released in the lead up to the last Christmas of the twentieth century, *La Bûche* is the directorial debut of prolific screenwriter Danièle Thompson, daughter of well-known comic director, writer and actor Gérard Oury. It is the first of the films that, along with other (romantic) comedies *Décalage horaire* (2002), Oscar-entry *Fauteuils d'orchestre* (2006) and *Le Code a changé* (2009) has assured Thompson's status as a successful popular filmmaker.⁵² Peopled by a host of top and middle-level stars including Claude Rich, Françoise Fabian, Emmanuelle Béart, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Sabine Azéma and Jean-Pierre Darroussin, the film drew 1.6 million

⁵² Thompson remains, though, outside the canon of even popular auteurship established by cinephilic treasurers of high cultural currency. Frédéric Bonnaud's review of *La Bûche* for *Les Inrockuptibles* is typically coruscating, dismissing the film as 'trivial nonsense' and remarking with heavy sarcasm: 'So *that's* a "great French mainstream film".' (Bonnaud 1999)

spectators in France – the majority outside Paris, as you might expect for a family film.⁵³ In addition to its saleable cast, it is typical of French family rom-coms in marrying comedy with melodrama, as the English title's punning focus on conflict (as opposed to a straight translation of the French word for the chocolate log traditionally eaten on Christmas Eve) reflects. Indeed, the film recommends itself for a detailed analysis because it distils several of the key tendencies identified in this chapter, as well as raising a number of far-reaching familial questions of its own.

Like the film Thompson co-wrote with director Élie Chouraqui six years earlier, *Les Marmottes*, *La Bûche* focuses on relationships within an extended family, in this case grown-up sisters Louba (Azéma), Sonia (Béart) and Milla (Gainsbourg), their divorced and initially estranged parents Yvette (Fabian) and Russian-Jewish immigrant Stanislas (Rich), and their secret illegitimate half-brother Joseph (Christopher Thompson). The opening narrative sequence unites mother and daughters for the funeral of her second husband. The sound of a mobile phone ringing from inside the coffin at once sets the darkly comic tone and introduces another important secondary character, Janine, the second husband's first wife and still close friend, whom Yvette identifies as the likely caller, stretching the bounds of the *famille recomposée*. This opening death resonates too with the symbolic death of the patriarch in postclassical French cinema, while a heart-attack that later comes close to killing the 'real' family patriarch, Stanislas, is one of the examples cited by Vincendeau of the use of the medical theme to further destabilise French filmic representations of the family.

⁵³ The exact figures are: 1,615,815 (France), 270,718 (Paris). Figures sourced from Simsi (2000).

La Bûche also bears comparison with *Un air de famille*, in its depiction of families' predisposition towards rigid role-assignment, perhaps suggestive of Freudian anxiety about the challenge to individual subjectivity posed by other subjectivities closely adjacent. In a comparable vein, in the context of Thompson's statements about the universal aspect of family themes, Vincendeau has noted that these can offer filmmakers a means of blending myth with psychology (Vincendeau 2008: 16, citing Thompson 2005; see also Pion-Dumas and Delmas 1999). In *La Bûche*, as in Klapisch's film, an ensemble structure here juxtaposes the two, allowing for an interplay between characters' self-images and external construction. Initially, the three sisters are caricatured: Milla is the selfish workaholic youngest sister with no time for others, acerbic, makeup-free and clad in biker leathers or shapeless khaki; Sonia is the perfect bourgeois housewife and mother, with no worries beyond the Christmas decor; and Louba is the kind but childless and penniless other woman married to Gilbert (Darroussin, who also appeared in *Un air de famille*), living with her father at forty-two. However, immediately following the opening sequence, Sonia and Milla are shown criticising one another, each in exaggerated terms that belittle the other: Milla is accused of meanness for bringing Sonia's daughter a hand-painted Christmas present, while twisted logic sees Sonia's offer that Milla can bring whomever she likes for Christmas dinner interpreted as a pose of tolerance to make Milla herself look intolerant. In this way, the process by which family stereotypes are reinforced is itself revealed. Given that the use of stereotypes both to announce a comic tone and also to facilitate spectators' negotiation of the network depicted has been identified as a staple of at least some multi-protagonist films (Mar Azcona 2010: 10), this subversion of the convention is unsettling. Furthermore, the spectator's initial cues to make the same reductive

judgements as indulged in by the sisters themselves – that is, their costume, performance style and other details of physical appearance – reinforce the multi-protagonist film's impulse to draw the spectator into its network, in this case calling us to question our readiness to judge on the basis of such surface details.

As the narrative progresses, the destabilisation of roles is compounded further, by their interchangeability in the *choral* constellation. When Sonia tells Louba the story of Joseph's illegitimate birth, instead of sympathising with their mother, the victim of adultery, Louba, herself pregnant, identifies with the plight of Joseph's poor single mother, left to raise a clandestine son. Louba's refusal to judge is only vindicated by an earlier revelation by Yvette that she too cheated prolifically on Stanislas – just as we later discover that the outwardly prim Sonia is also cheating on her husband, with a 'rough and ready' butcher whom she barely knows. Even more strikingly, Janine, set up as occupying the familiar and negatively constructed rom-com position of the other woman, when she is accorded narrative space, turns out to be not a hateful rival but a pleasant and lonely elderly woman, with whom Yvette ends up becoming friends: a rare moment of female solidarity superseding romantic rivalry. A scene in which she and Yvette stand at the dead man's grave and the second wife tells the first that there is only one remaining space finds comedy in the slowness of traditional rituals to adapt to new social configurations. In common with the weekly dinner in *Un air*, Christmas constitutes another of these rituals. Recalling a moment in the earlier film when Jaoui's character Betty wondered aloud where the logic is in 'treating people like shit' all year then buying them a present because it is their birthday, the holiday reveals the contradictory nature of relations between family members, which are at once, by their nature, familiar – in other words foregoing niceties – yet at the same time, on formal occasions, demanding of

politeness and respect, even more so as the mercurial family acquires more distant members. This tension is evident in the disputes over attendance at the Christmas Eve dinner, at which both Yvette and Stanislas would like to be present, but not together, while Milla also threatens to pull out on the pretext of disliking Sonia's husband and children. A scene in which Sonia gives the expensive gifts she has just purchased to passers-by (after running into her husband's lover) highlights and undercuts the absurdity of formalities divorced from human meaning.

The Christmas setting also provides a fulcrum for the film's different generic participations. As befits melodrama, the characters of *La Bûche* are uniformly suffering in the build-up to the holiday: Yvette is newly widowed, Stanislas possibly dying, Sonia on the brink of divorce and Milla lonely and tearful. Because of her unexplained pregnancy, Louba tells Joseph she has 'the blues', only to have him second her, presumably because he is missing his young daughter for whom he is making a model as a gift, rendering Joseph as another father who is caring but who falls short of being his child's main caregiver. Even his ex Annabelle (Isabelle Carré) turns up tearful and defensive, mid-separation from her second husband. Cliché is furthermore taken to comical extremes when Louba's lover Gilbert pours his heart out to a stranger whom he mistakes for Milla (because of a motorcycle helmet), only to have the latter affirm that he is 'down in the dumps' as well! However, if melodramatic themes – explored in dark night-time sequences set in such locations as Joseph's humble and poorly lit dwelling or in a hospital waiting room – appear far removed from the magical space of romantic comedy, the festive backdrop, whose lights are celebrated in an opening credit sequence accompanied by a cheery rendition of 'Jingle Bells', is in fact typical of the new romance's displacement of events to a space outside the everyday.

Moreover, romantic plot-lines run alongside those of familial drama. Notably, Louba's adulterous relationship with Gilbert at once exploits and acknowledges the power of romance to mystify. Played out for the most part in strangers' apartments, whose keys are temporarily in the possession of estate agent Gilbert, their liaison is thus based on a wilful pretence about the pair's relationship to the objective world. The exoticism already associated with Louba, as a Russian dancer, is complemented on their Christmas Eve together by Gilbert's staging of a romantic dinner in a baroque luxury apartment worthy of Versailles, complete with a tropical fruit platter. Despite her age, or rather to counterbalance it, Louba is not only an overgrown daughter still living at home, but her manner is childlike, as with her girlish delight over Gilbert's efforts to please her, disavowing her status as 'home-wrecker' and further facilitating a romantic ambience of wide-eyed wonder. On the other hand, this is a long-term relationship, and Louba's explicit acknowledgement that Gilbert loves her because she's 'Bohemian', and that he will not want to know about her pregnancy, foregrounds the paradoxical distance implicit in romance's idealistic construction of the other. This tension between the ideal and the real is ostensibly dissipated in a highly romantic scene, set to violins, where Gilbert declares his commitment to Louba and her unborn child. The triumph of emotion over reason is apparent in Gilbert's allusions to what he wants 'in [his] heart', while the major economic problems we have been told a sixth child will present are brushed aside by his repeated promise that 'we'll manage'. This relationship's conclusion appears somewhat conservative, with Louba capitulating to Gilbert's patriarchal promise to help set her up in an apartment. Nonetheless, the reference to pragmatic concerns in the scene tempers the storyline's adherence to a purely romantic model.

Nor, as I have argued throughout this thesis, should resolutions be dislocated from their context. Notably, an earlier scene that invited the viewer to engage with Gilbert's current wife by showing him cuddled up with her, hand on her pregnant belly, tempers this resolution by leaving us to wonder about the fate of Gilbert's other unborn child. Elsewhere, too, the narrative returns repeatedly to the theme of the damage that adultery and divorce cause for children. Joseph recounts a bitter childhood experience arising from hatred of his father, while his efforts to make a present for his daughter suggest his anxiety that his own child should avoid such traumatic experiences. They also suggest how the combination of men's greater involvement in child-rearing combined with high divorce rates and increased mobility (his wife and child live elsewhere in France) can leave fathers emotionally adrift, as reflected by the emergence of organisations such as Fathers for Justice or, in France, SOS Papa. Milla and Sonia, too, describe being variously traumatised by their parents' breakup and relationship with their step-father. Elsewhere, in another role reversal, Sonia assumes the role of bad parent, as she and her husband argue viciously in front of their young son. A secondary plot in which a hysterical Annabelle temporarily abandons her new baby son with Joseph further extends the suggestion that romantic trials impact negatively on the children who are their product. As Powrie has noted, preoccupation with the fate of French children from a socio-demographic and political perspective follows logically on from the nation's combination of high birth and divorce rates, with numbers of single mothers on the rise. In this respect *La Bûche*, like *LOL*, *Une semaine sur deux* and *De l'autre côté du lit* with their volatile teens and pre-teens, can be seen as a moderate alternative to the interest in child abuse and disturbed childhoods described by Powrie in the 2000s (2010: 59-60).

In spite of all this, Louba's impregnation at 42 is constructed overwhelmingly positively, suggesting that the trend I identified in Chapter 3 of older women taking on roles formerly reserved for younger ones bears, too, on the issue of motherhood. Indeed, *La Bûche* is one of the few films to show a significantly older than average mother (the mean being just under age 30 in France towards the end of the 2000s [Hampshire 2009: 398]), reflecting the fact that more and more mothers are having children later in Western countries – although here Louba is perhaps atypical in that it is not her career that has prevented her from mothering. The pregnancy's effect on Milla is especially striking, in accelerating her transformation from no-nonsense professional associated with the 'masculine' world of computers to broody, soft-hearted family girl. (This prefigures Gainsbourg's character's similar arc in *Prête-moi ta main*, where it is also linked to maternity.) Visiting Gilbert unbeknown to her sister, Milla states that to deny Louba motherhood would be 'disgusting'; she promises her sister that 'we'll do whatever it takes'; and, coming close to the anti-abortion discourses of *Pédale douce* and *Mauvaise foi*, she admits that 'I was afraid you might do something stupid'. There is also an implicit deadline imposed on this narrative by virtue of Louba's age. Additionally, the importance of filiation and heritage are emphasised in this film, through a scene in which Stanislas asks Sonia to give her son a childhood toy of his from Russia and explain its significance as a survivor of the Holocaust. Overall, the ending appears to bear out Stanislas' pronouncement that 'there is nothing more beautiful than family'.

However, just as I have argued that temporal contextualisation, looking back, undermines the celebration of Louba and Gilbert's love, equally what might be called a spatial, or comparative, perspective across different storylines at the film's close further prevents the romantic model from proving totalising. For example, in a

reversal of Louba's trajectory, Sonia – for whom children have not proven enough to make her happy in the absence of a loyal husband – is newly, and willingly, alone. This is typical of the ensemble film's refusal of univocal messages. It should also be noted that, characteristically for Thompson, a degree of narrative reflexivity further contributes to the film's interest in the construction of stories and problematises straightforward interpretations. Notable here is the interpolation of intertitles counting down the days until Christmas and, especially, several instances of to-camera addresses, where characters narrate seemingly significant memories. These addresses are at odds with the film's otherwise broadly classical style, dislocating individual characters from the group compositions typical of the *choral* to suspend linear narrative progression in favour of an ostensible focus on psychology. Characters' tales range from historicised nostalgia (Stanislas' story of escaping from Russia) to trauma relived (Joseph's childhood) or starry-eyed romance (Yvette's tale of running away with her second husband) – all of which are clichés of autobiography. Interestingly, Sonia's story – the only one told to another character, Louba, but still filmed head on as an address, reinforcing the spectator's positioning within the film's network of characters – contains a further playful intertext. At the end of her tether and about to leave her husband, she begins by rhetorically challenging her interlocutor as to her identity in the very terms according to which we are likely to have judged her at the start of the film: 'What do you know about my life? I'm strong, rich, married with kids... The rock.' Her combative, sarcastic tone paves the way for a contrastingly illuminating insight into her true psychology at this moment of emotional vulnerability. However, her subsequent tale of her childhood self and a friend bumping into her father with his girlfriend and illegitimate son contains the detail that they had been seeing classic New Wave

triangular romance *Jules et Jim/Jules and Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962). This highlights the story's points of contact with another New Wave ur-text, Truffaut's *Les Quatre cents coups*. That is, Sonia's account mirrors a pivotal moment from the earlier film, in which protagonist Antoine Doinel and his friend famously cross paths with Doinel's mother and her lover. This reference makes a mockery of the still dominant school of post-Freudian thought seeking to root human psychology in childhood experience – the very model that I have earlier suggested the film elsewhere invites us to invoke. Dabbling in the kind of cinephilic referential play often reserved for auteurs in French cinema, and appropriating nothing less than one of the definitive films of the New Wave canon to her popular ends, Thompson thus creates a level on which all narratives' fictionalising tendency is stressed and the significance of the family itself wholly undercut.

Finally, a particularly interesting detail of *La Bûche* is that romantic and familial plots do not in fact simply run in parallel; in one case, the boundaries begin to blur. Unaware of his identity as her father's son, Milla is attracted to Joseph. This is first signalled by shots showing her gaze lingering on his torso in the hospital as the family awaits news about their father. To underline the point, Thompson uses a jump cut, moving in on Joseph's body from Milla's point of view; in any case, Milla later explicitly admits to Louba that she is 'like jelly' before him. In typically ludic fashion, the narrative later further complicates their relationship by introducing the possibility that Milla may not in fact be related to Joseph at all, as she may be the child of her step-father Jean-Pierre. What is striking, however, is the way in which the film refuses to allow the uneasy spectre of incest to be easily dismissed. On the two occasions on which Milla's attraction to Joseph is conveyed, camerawork and dialogue at the same time highlight similarities between the two characters that seem

to support the suggestion that they are in fact related. Thus when her eyes devour him in the hospital, consecutive shots show the characters smoking a cigarette in the same way, holding it in their mouths without hands; and when she discusses her feelings for him with Louba, she states explicitly that it is unusual for her to hold a candle for a man with the same problems ('introversion, neurosis...') as herself. In Chapter 3 I argued that the metaphorically incestuous pattern pairing older men with much younger actresses is reasonably common in the rom-com. Rarer, though, are references to literally incestuous desire; in fact, a moment in *Mariage Mixte* where a wife berates her over-protective husband for wishing to remain 'the love of [his daughter's] life' forever is as close as the genre comes to probing the topic (by contrast, for example, with family-centred auteur drama *L'Heure d'été/Summer Hours* [Olivier Assayas, 2008]). This is perhaps surprising given incest's relative prominence in French culture, where it has not only featured as a staple of classic comic cinema but recurs, for example, in popular songs.⁵⁴ In any case, its appearance in this genre in *La Bûche* is not constructed to shock the spectator. Rather, its effect here is to blur the parameters of heterosexual and Freudian family romance, highlighting the two configurations' commonality as self-other relations with all the complexities of intersubjectivity and desire these imply. As Evans and Deleyto have noted, romance is ultimately a question of identity itself, approached through a dialogical model through which characters learn about the other in the self (1998: 3-4). The lifting of the incest taboo, even by implication, in *La Bûche* confronts the question of to what extent romantic attraction seeks out the self in the other. Characteristically for this film, no answer is given. The final scene maintains the

⁵⁴ For example 'Scandale dans la famille', sung by Sacha Distel and others, or compositions by Serge Gainsbourg, both sung (his notorious hit 'Lemon Incest') and filmed.

sexual tension between Joseph and Milla as the pair, now both aware of their possible blood tie, pull back from a tantalising near kiss at the last moment. Milla invokes a classic romantic text of thwarted love, *Romeo and Juliet*, as if to round off the film's generic credentials, while Joseph places the final accent on matriarchal power with his remark that: 'Mothers know everything. They should be made to talk.' Unlike in Shakespeare's tragic tale, this statement reserves the possibility of a future for even this couple, on the basis that they may yet discover they are not related. In this storyline, too, Thompson therefore preserves the openness which I have argued is typical of female-authored family rom-coms. The fact that the actor playing Joseph is her own son again brings extra-textual detail to inform her narrative in a playful way, underlining her status as a mother who, as metaphorical 'speaker' or filmmaker, does not in fact 'know everything'. It represents, in other words, a final warning to the viewer against drawing facile conclusions, about either familial or romantic roles.

CONCLUSION

The family rom-com reveals itself in this chapter as not only a commercial means of widening audience appeal to various age-groups but a convenient forum for the negotiation of broader familial questions prevalent in French cinema of the last 20 years in particular. It is in this branch of romantic comedy that female directors have made their most substantial imprint. A preoccupation with the everyday not only reflects women's historical inhabitation of the domestic sphere but their ongoing struggle to reconcile this legacy, and biological imperatives, with social changes that today allow them greater access to a social status at least notionally equal to that enjoyed by men in the public sphere. Additionally, women have frequently looked to

the openness and inherently social focus of, specifically, the ensemble (family) form to treat questions with feminist resonance. More precisely, I have argued that the ensemble form may be structurally better suited to a feminine aesthetic – and ethic – in its rejection of discourses of individualism. This represents an additional dimension to the defiant position vis-à-vis ‘high’ intellectual French cinema implied by filmmakers’ decision to work in the rom-com genre, as detailed in Chapter 1. In other words, the adoption of such forms is a political as well as an aesthetic choice.⁵⁵

The attitudes towards the family on display in the films examined in the chapter are varied in ways that can sometimes be explained in terms of authorship; however even within individual films they are typified by ambivalence. Representations broadly keep pace with and adapt to new familial configurations in today’s world and comment on these in different ways. Exemplary here is the interest in child welfare increasingly visible throughout the period and the related phenomenon of the genre’s concerted interest in divorce at the end of the 2000s. A spectrum of attitudes is mirrored by a range of positions ‘on offer’ for both genders, but especially women, within the family rom-com.

It is nonetheless as well to recall here that the range of female profiles accommodated by the French rom-com is interpretable in more than one way. The instability and multiplicity of feminine identities has been cited as a source of woe for feminists wishing to present a united front against men, whose life goals appear, contrastingly, characterised by striking singularity of purpose (see for example Hakim 2000: 37-9). Indeed, the concept of choice as a whole has become a by-word for a host of arguably regressive post-feminist discourses. More importantly, nor

⁵⁵ Interestingly, Emma Wilson (2005: 221) has also proposed a familial angle for women’s mode of production, because certain actresses have gone on to direct and because the same actresses often feature in female-authored work. Both tendencies can be traced across rom-com production and especially in the ensembles.

does reference to a variety of identities paint a wholly accurate picture of the French rom-com's work. In fact, it is striking that motherhood, and procreation as a whole, are almost without exception positively configured in this genre of reconciliation and renewal – recently, especially in films by men. Where male characters are only occasionally relocated from a romantic to a care-giving role, female characters frequently negotiate the two domains, with uneven degrees of success. If professional fulfilment makes an appearance, it is a limited one. Thus although there is some differentiation of 'options' in the feminine roles depicted by the genre, motherhood itself emerges as all but imperative. This appears particularly important in view of a recent Australian study indicating the extent to which maternal discourses influence women (Maher and Saugères 2007), as borne out by the high birth rate in France.⁵⁶ Related to the relative absence of career women in these films, it is also significant that, as so often with this genre, the family films tend to be even more exclusively middle-class in their focus than other examples of the French genre. Despite these caveats, the huge improvement on female characters' historical consignment to monolinear fictional identities is apparent. Equally, the family rom-com continues French women filmmakers' important contribution to the on-screen portrayal of female relationships with members of their own sex – as well as allowing for some additions to this trend by male directors.

This latter feature of the subgenre is one example of the way in which its particular cross-generic identity facilitates a productively comparative angle on romantic and other interpersonal relations, with which they are juxtaposed and occasionally overlap. Moving beyond gendered ideological issues that emerge from

⁵⁶ All 100 subjects interviewed, whether or not they had children, revealed themselves to be affected in some way by these discourses.

its study, it is highly significant that part of the work done by many of the texts examined in this chapter is to blur the parameters between familial and romantic desire. With marriage in crisis and the bonds between individual partners rendered flimsy in the genre, parenthood can provide an alternative structure for longer-term interpersonal commitment. This suggests procreation's status as itself an expression of the hedonistic imperative for individual self-fulfilment associated with the contemporary era – a linkage supported by a recent French survey of one thousand citizens' reasons for having children, where 73% of respondents cited motives of personal gratification (Anon 2009c). It also reverses the dynamic set up at the start of this chapter whereby the love story is the *raison d'être* of the family unit, casting the desire for family – at its most basic, the human reproductive urge – as pivotal in ensuring the survival of dyadic partnerships in France today, even if these are for the most part re-imagined along less conventional lines.

CHAPTER 5

GENRE, STYLE AND TRANSNATIONALISM

This chapter examines the explosion of French romantic comedies during the 1990s and 2000s specifically from the perspective of transnational genre filmmaking, as this practice is expressed through thematic preoccupations but also, particularly, style. It will be divided into two sections: firstly, after defining the terms for understanding transnationalism in relation to genre, I will focus on the influence of external cinemas on the national genre before, secondly, moving on to examine how the French rom-com in turn puts its own spin on a global genre and re-packages it for export. The first section of the discussion will include a reception study of critical reactions to the trend in the French press, as a focal point for attitudes towards global culture and notably US cultural hegemony – a question that has attracted great critical debate in France. Finally, in-depth analysis of the transnational aspects of global hit *L'Arnacoeur* (2010) will draw together many of the ideas from the rest of the chapter through concrete examples.

GLOBAL ROMANTIC COMEDY: THE OTHER WITHIN

Despite cinema's ties to the nation state, in this millennium it is increasingly the concept of transnationalism that has gained ground as a salient perspective from which to apprehend the medium, as it traverses international distribution and other public and private exhibition circuits. Thus cultural and film theorists including Charles Acland (2005), Sean Cubitt (2004: 356) and Elizabeth Ezra and Terry

Rowden (2006) agree that cinema's role is not only 'trans-local understandings' (Vertovec and Cohen 1999: xvii) but also 'felt internationalism' (Acland 2005: 239) has speeded up in recent years. In regard to the latter idea and to film's association with cosmopolitan identity-formation, Ezra and Rowden's elaborations of transnational cinema are instructive:

As a marker of cosmopolitanism, the transnational at once transcends the national and presupposes it. For transnationalism, its nationalist other is neither an armored enemy with whom it must engage in a grim battle to the death nor a verbose relic whose outdated postures can only be scorned. From a transnational perspective, nationalism is instead a canny dialogical partner whose voice often seems to be growing stronger at the very moment that its substance is fading away. Like postmodernism and poststructuralism, other discourses that have complicated the notion of unmediated representation, transnationalism factors heterogeneity into its basic semantic framework. (2006: 4)

Recognition of the close ties between nationalism and transnationalism as 'dialogical partner[s]' undergirds my suggestion in this section that for French romantic comedy, the global romantic comedy is best seen as 'the other within'. As for heterogeneity, this chapter will underline the diverse componential roots and makeup of the corpus, visible at every turn in a genre born out of the encounter between an indigenous film tradition and a transnational genre that is already hybrid in 'its basic semantic framework'. It is significant, too, that the scholars cited above go on shortly after the quoted passage to recognise the ongoing, 'emotionally charged' (ibid) force

of nationalism, which will be to the fore in my discussion of the rom-com's reception. The subjectivity implied by reference to emotion further informs the notion of the external genre as other – but an other that offers symbiotic benefits.

Given the extensive explanation of the understanding of rom-com shaping this work contained in Chapter 1, it only remains at this stage to clarify what is meant here by *global* romantic comedy. Evidently the genre in its widest sense, as that which negotiates changes in gender relations from the perspective of comedy, exists in most if not all national contexts. In some, it is particularly widespread – for example, it seems likely that a form of rom-com is the dominant second genre in which most Bollywood musicals participate. Like other genres, it is transnational most immediately in a physical sense of being widely exported by various nations. While the example of Bollywood film is marketed to non-resident Indians and others internationally, some of the most successful British exports of recent decades have been rom-coms, on which more shortly. However, it is the Hollywood rom-com that of course represents the most globally visible variant of the genre. Thanks to the worldwide dominance of Hollywood filmmaking, here the rom-com coincides with cinema as a whole; indeed, Hollywood has in the past routinely been invoked as the other in relation to which less internationally dominant film industries and practices must define themselves, whether this is seen as a relationship primarily of contrast, as with more artistically positioned products (Elsaesser 2005) or of comparison (Moine 2002). In Chapter 1 I cited Moine's recognition of the important influence of 'globalised neo-Hollywood model[s]' on French cinema. This phrasing captures the extent to which the very idea of Hollywood is coming to represent the global in cinema and film culture: as Ezra and Rowden observe in their discussion of the personae of transnational stars, national identity becomes sidelined in such a way

that '[t]he performance of Americanness is increasingly becoming a "universal" or "universalizing" characteristic in world cinema' (2006: 2).

I have argued in this thesis that what is widely understood as the global rom-com originated in the US. While fully recognising the caveats which must apply to such a form of short-hand, in this chapter 'global' means, primarily, deriving from Hollywood. This is not to say that other traditions do not show their influence – both Almodóvar and the British rom-com tradition have been cited in this study. However, even these examples find themselves complicated by virtue of their very success, which has immediately seen them partially absorbed into the Hollywood machine, whether at the level of reception or production. Two of Almodóvar's so-called muses, Antonio Banderas and Penélope Cruz, in fact constitute examples of the performed 'Americanness' of transnational stars cited by Ezra and Rowden, while the international popularity of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, UK 1994) was a major factor in the buyout of production company Working Title Films' Anglo-Dutch corporate backer Polygram Filmed Entertainment by Universal Studios in 1999, prior to the release of several more hit rom-coms penned by screenwriter Richard Curtis. It is more than mere Gallic simplification to refer, as French rom-com reviewers sometimes do, to 'les comédies anglo-saxonnes' (see for example Anon 2007a).

In this first section I will, then, approach the French rom-com from the same perspective adopted by Baudrillard (2010: 82) in his pronouncement on the topic of modernity, where he borrows film vocabulary to endow the US with the position of original version and Europe that of the dubbed or subtitled copy. That is, the focus will limit itself for now broadly to the question of global influence on the French genre conceived for the purposes of analysis as one-way traffic, before reversing the

paradigm later in the chapter. However, even such a deliberately reductive working model finds itself immediately complicated, bearing in mind earlier allusions to the heterogeneity of transnational culture and practice per se. To give just one example of the difficulties of pinpointing cultural origins, the widespread legacy of the films of Woody Allen – more popular in France than in the US (Mazdon 2000: 95) – has been a feature of this thesis. This illustrates the complexity of the transnational palimpsest, given the director's own well-known emulation of French and other European art cinemas, and therefore the impossibility of discussing influence in a straightforward way. Nonetheless, I will now attempt to analyse global reference points visible in the French genre, paying attention to what they say about French attitudes towards globalised film and culture. In the first place, I will look at examples of how French rom-coms borrow from global predecessors in a relatively implicit way and in the second, contrastingly, through pastiche in the sense of 'an imitation you are meant to know is an imitation' (Dyer 2007:1).

Stylistic and Other Borrowings

This section examining the global rom-com's more subtle and diffuse presence in the French genre will be divided into two subsections examining, in turn, various stylistic and other generically conventionalised echoes of the global rom-com, including around the deployment of stars, followed by particular uses of music and language redolent of transnational predecessors.

I. Style and genre

Many aesthetic features and generic conventions within French rom-coms are linked to their Hollywood ancestry. Starting with the first of these, one detail skimmed by

my earlier overview of global rom-com conventions in Chapter 2 was visual style. While any comments on the texture and appearance of a whole genre remain necessarily over-generalised, this is a particularly important point given the key role played by visual style in feminist critiques of the classical rom-com historically (see Durham 1998: 61). In short, the classical Hollywood rom-com has been seen as emulating other films produced in that context in creating an ideologically suspect, because powerful (Ellis 1989: 66), illusion of truth. This illusion is to a considerable extent reliant on the classical style: notably, high-key lighting designed to show maximum detail in an unobtrusive way; classical composition and framing, such as one- and two-shots; continuity editing (normally complementing plot linearity), including such conventions as shot-reverse shots, eyeline and other matches and cross-cutting between different locales; and the use of montage sequences.

While French cinema has perhaps never been as wedded as has Hollywood to the goal of linear plot advancement in a concentrated, transparent manner characterised by a high degree of narrative redundancy (cf. Moine 2007b: 141), popular cinema from the classical to the mainstream in France has followed a basically continuous editing style. However, many of the traits listed above are less immediately identifiable with Gallic style but are quite common in the rom-com. Beginning with *mise-en-scène* and composition, most French rom-coms are generally brightly and evenly lit, eschewing naturalism. That they rely heavily on one- and two-shots, too, is a by-product of their focus on two-person relationships first and foremost – with ensemble films providing a notable exception in both lighting and composition. However, a film that stands out for revelling in showing off its performers, and high production values in general, through lushly lit shots including many medium close-ups is *Hors de prix*. Featuring top-level stars Audrey

Tautou and Gad Elmaleh and an opulent Côte d’Azur setting, the film intersperses grandiose long and overhead shots of palaces at Biarritz and Cannes, and especially the Carlton Hotel’s impressively kept grounds and the surrounding area, with loving close-ups of the luxury consumer goods that are the object of desire of Tautou’s shamelessly avaricious character Irène.⁵⁷ Much is made, too, of both Tautou and Elmaleh’s appealing appearances, the plot contriving to bedeck them with sumptuous costumes designed quite explicitly to show off the physical attributes they are ‘selling’, as they both play at being gold-diggers amid the hotel’s moneyed clientele. It might be noted here that high-key lighting also facilitates absolute narrative clarity, which is relevant to a superficially fairly densely plotted farce involving multiple levels of duplicity and role-playing. Both the setting and the plot organisation contribute to the film’s pastiche of the screwball comedy. In addition, one reviewer notes specific echoes of Lubitsch in its use of accumulated concrete objects to signal both ellipsis and excess. Exemplary here is a scene in which Irène, in flirtatious mode, sticks a cocktail umbrella into her hair; we then dissolve to the same head decorated with multiple umbrellas... and pull back to reveal a drunken Irène (Anon 2006b). *Hors de prix*’s evocation of Americanness is not strictly limited to the classical period. Notably, a credit sequence in the ‘stick figure’ style associated with the American 1950s and 1960s, set to sprightly piano, percussion and saxophone jazz chords, extends its referential universe at least beyond Lubitsch’s lifespan.

Within a broadly continuous style, the specific editing devices of cross-cutting and montages are also disproportionately common in French rom-coms, by

⁵⁷ Needless to say, many of the luxury goods featured – from settings to fashion, gourmet food and fine wine – are at the same time French-accented international exports, contributing to this film’s saleability in multiple territories including the UK and US.

comparison with national practice as a whole. The, only somewhat obtrusive, device of parallel editing is visible from the contemporary genre's earliest exemplars, such as *Romuald et Juliette*. Thus François Ramasse (1989), writing in *Positif*, highlights the cross-cuts between the protagonists' children's very different bathrooms (Romuald is a rich businessman and Juliette a cleaning lady and mother of five) to illustrate his suggestion that what Serreau's style lacks in originality it makes up for in efficiency, a word immediately associable with the Hollywood narrative-centric approach to cinema. Cross-cutting becomes, then, a signature of emulated Americanness, also commented on in a review of another early rom-com, Akerman's overtly transatlantic, bilingual and transnationally produced *Un divan à New York*, where the editing in early sequences is seen as so vigorously parallel as to become 'systematic' (Frodon 1996). These examples highlight the fact that intercutting in this way is a particular convention at the beginning of romantic comedies focused on two characters, where each is being introduced – and usually, as with Romuald and Juliette, contrasted in such a way as to set up humorous conflict later. It persists in numerous films as the genre takes hold.

As for the montage sequence, defined as 'a segment of a film that summarizes a topic or compresses a passage of time into brief symbolic or typical images' (Bordwell and Thompson 2008: 479), this has endured as a stock feature of the Hollywood repertoire from the classical to the contemporary period, thanks to its ability to pack a great deal of narrative detail into a short space of time – efficiency as *modus operandi* once again. *Ma femme est une actrice*, for instance, uses a montage to plunge us into the late 1970s – and to re-envision the 'city of lovers', Paris, through the lens of cinema's 'romantic playground', New York (Jermyn 2009: 12) – via a homage to the opening sequence of Allen's *Manhattan* (USA 1979).

After announcing its transatlantic leanings through a credit sequence showing famous photographs of classical Hollywood divas, overlaid with Ella Fitzgerald's indolent rendition of 'Lullaby of Birdland', a montage of stills of Parisians going about their daily business is accompanied by the protagonist-narrator's (Attal) commentary in voiceover that with 1.4 million women in the city, or two for every man, the Parisian bachelor faces favourable odds in the dating game. As if this precise echo of Allen's film were not obvious enough, Attal then rams the point home with the afterthought: '...but not compared with New York, where [the ratio] is 5.2 to 1!', as we cut to an image of the Statue of Liberty. This self-alignment with a recognised master of the genre is about more than just marketing. I have argued in Chapter 2 that the self-questioning mode epitomised by Allen's romantic comedies and dubbed by Shumway 'intimacy' is the dominant romantic discourse on display in the French rom-com, for aesthetic reasons bound up with the French allegiance to realism and openness, as well as ideological ones. These relate to a certain reluctance on the part of French society, still more heavily patriarchal than in the US or Britain, to adjust to women's increased freedom and equality. As Richard Dyer (2007: 59) has shown, 'pastiche facilitat[es] the experience of the imitated work'. Accordingly one feature of the 'intimate' character of many French rom-coms is an Allen-esque sensibility which I have described in Chapter 3 in terms of Rowe's concept of the melodramatised male. The Allen example in this way again crystallises one of the complexities of discussing influence. Shumway in fact suggests that the use of 'various devices to frame the material, often with the effect of making the story seem like autobiography or confession' (2003a: 158) typifies intimacy. Voiceover is the most obvious example of such devices. In France, there is a history of male voiceovers commenting on romance too, in New Wave films by Godard and,

especially, Truffaut (*Tirez sur le pianiste/Shoot the Piano Player!* [1960] is a famous example) – although these do tend to correspond less directly to a single male protagonist dominating the film's subject position. Certainly, self-analysing voiceovers recur so frequently in the French romantic comedy now as to have been integrated into the genre in a way that no longer *necessarily* overtly invokes Hollywood, or at least not consciously. At some point, in other words, influence ceases to be distinguishable as such and gains its own identity in a new context.

A rom-com more identifiable with contemporary Hollywood that makes substantial use of montage is *Prête-moi ta main*. This is a useful text for studying global influence given producer-actor Chabat's status as a Frenchman with offices in Hollywood, as well as his unashamed remarks about wishing to emulate the success of global rom-coms like those written by Curtis (Loison 2006). To this end, for *Prête-moi* Chabat hired a team of writers to script his own idea *à l'américaine*, with immediately visible consequences. The montage here encapsulates the strategy adopted by the script as a whole: a highly streamlined approach to narrative designed to wring maximum laughs from densely packed information, thanks to careful attention to comic timing. An early sequence is exemplary. The film opens in a colourfully flamboyant anti-realist mode that almost caricatures Hollywood practice. As protagonist Luis (Chabat) narrates in voiceover his romantic history, in a heady combination of generic signalling and character exposition, flashbacks in muted tones show him badly disguised as a 1980s version of himself. This introduction recalls Grossvogel's (2005: 73) stress on Hollywood's romantic heroes and heroines as 'functional figures of comedy' and elicits 'fear' from one reviewer, who likens it to a puppet show (Anon 2006d). The colour seeps further from the image as Luis is left by a girlfriend, until only his girlfriend's purple scarf remains, a monochromatic

detail on a black and white background, constituting an out-of-place convention from photography and auteur cinema [Figure 16]. Further cinematic conventions are parodied as melancholy piano notes accompany slow-motion shots of our beleaguered hero, then the camera spins in an overhead shot above him lying on his bed, plagued by adolescent angst, before the mood is lightened by the revelation that Luis' obsession with his lost love led him to recreate her smell and become a much sought-after perfumer. This highly telescoped interlude has taken a mere four minutes, 26 seconds. Just over eight minutes later, after the film's initial 'problem' – that Luis' sisters are refusing to continue acting as housewives for him and demand he marries – has been established (and we have been briefly introduced to the newly single female lead, the sister of one of Luis' colleagues), we are presented with a second, even tighter montage, showing the different candidates with whom Luis is set up on blind dates. This time the device is further denaturalised by the use of split screens and moving panels. Mastery of comic rhythm – so associated with Anglo-American culture that *le timing* is untranslatable – is displayed by a final, punchline-like, yet deliberately understated because short, shot in which the blind date is a man.



Figure 16: Self-conscious artifice in *Prête-moi ta main*

Alongside its use of montages, associable with Hollywood for many decades, the densely referential nature of this opening, creating a strikingly non-naturalistic impression, is more redolent of postclassical Hollywood cinema (see Tasker 1993: 61) than French filmmaking. Of course, Lartigau's use of not only bright lighting but a strikingly bright colour palette adds to this effect and is equally more associable with US than French cinema (cf. Selfe 2010: 158). This raises the question of stylistic evolution in Hollywood. According to Bordwell (2006: 121-38), a new variant on classical style he calls intensified continuity style now dominates mainstream US fare. It is characterised by fast editing, wide-ranging camera movements and 'extreme' focal lengths, especially the extensive use of the close-up. With regard to this latter convention, Vincendeau (1993; 2000: 10) has specifically underlined the use of the close-up as in the classical era much more common in US than French cinema. Close-ups also have an amplified role in a genre focused on emotion and where the pairing of different combinations of known stars acts as an important marketing hook.

Bearing this in mind, the film that on its release in 2002, in addition to explicitly referencing Hollywood, emulated the style (including narrative organisation) of a contemporary US rom-com more closely than any previous French film was *Décalage horaire*. This is achieved not only through the counterpointing of the two main characters in the opening but a preference for close-ups, one-shots and short takes throughout. Related to the first two conventions, a comment by *Screen International*'s reviewer that 'never before has Binoche exuded such a mega-watt star persona' (Goodridge 2002), and likening her to Meg Ryan illustrates how the privileging of this type of shot is in turn linked to Hollywood's hard-selling of stars.

Although it would be neither possible nor particularly informative to list further rom-com convention like ‘meet cutes’ or wrong partners ubiquitous in both Hollywood and France, one more does merit attention here for its prevalence and possible links to a postmodern sensibility: the deception scenario. As touched on in Chapter 2, Krutnik has emphasised the recurrence of scenes in which lovers are forced by circumstance to ‘play’ at being lovers – before assuming the role in earnest – as symptomatic of the overt artifice characterising the new romance. Whether or not such fabrications are more to the fore in the recent cycle is actually unclear – the conceptually adjacent *quiproquo*, or case of mistaken or falsified identity is central, too, to classical screwball and is routinely cited by French reviewers as a stock generic feature; in his later discussion even Krutnik himself does acknowledge the presence of deception scenarios in the Hollywood rom-com as a whole. Such plot contortions also occur in the *comédie boulevardière* or, going back to the nineteenth century, in romantic ür-text *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rostand: 2002 [1897]) – on which one of Krutnik’s (2002: 141-4) key examples, *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* (Michael Lehmann, USA 1996) is based. On the whole, then, the plot convention of feigned romance is familiar to French audiences, but is probably still most associated with a global tradition. French rom-coms in which it appears include, in addition to *Prête-moi*, both *Quatre étoiles* and *Hors de prix*, *Pédale douce*, *De vrais mensonges*, *Cliente*, *Essaye-moi*, *Il ne faut jurer...de rien!*, *Ma femme est une actrice*, *Je vous trouve très beau* and *Quand la mer monte*. The fact that most of these examples occur in post-millennial films is congruent with the global genre’s general progress towards consolidation within the French film landscape. That these examples range from a film that has been seen as so crassly commercial as *Je vous trouve très beau* (see for example Morain 2006a) to the multi-prize-winning *Quand la mer monte*,

speaks to the widespread reverberations of such a shift – and to the eclectic applications of generic approaches to cinema.

II. Love songs and language

In this section I examine the use of the English language and, secondarily, Franglais in the French rom-com, both through songs and elsewhere in the narrative, as an example of self-proclaimed allusion to a global tradition. The use of love songs elaborated in an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ context, and so in English if there are lyrics, is in fact so widespread in the French rom-com as to preclude a list. American classics are common (‘As Time Goes By’ in *Les Marmottes* or ‘Lullaby of Birdsong’ in *Ma Femme est une actrice*) but British music is also popular, from Spandau Ballet’s ‘I Know This Much is True’ in *Ce soir je dors chez toi* to ‘London Calling’ by The Clash, again in *Ma femme*, and Brit-pop hit ‘Alright’ by Supergrass prominently (including over the DVD menu) in *LOL*. Even in a lower budget film like *Essaye-moi*, a hymn to cartoonish Hollywood slapstick, presumably to avoid copyright clearance costs, director Martin-Laval introduces brief snippets of original English-language songs including Diana Ross and the Supremes’ ‘Where Did Our Love Go?’ into a soundtrack predominantly originally composed by Belgian Pierre Van Dormael and performed by the Brussels Jazz Orchestra, but also in English. The theme song ‘From the Very Start I Knew It Was You’ imitates the style of real classics so perfectly as to sound like a minor, forgotten one. The key point is that alignment with an English-language music tradition is often actively sought out.

Other rom-coms integrate English into their dialogue. These can be usefully split into the categories of those that display anxiety about the spread of English and those that welcome it. Notable in the first category are the pair of transatlantic

romances, *Un divan à New York* (1996) and *Décalage horaire* (2002), which both star Binoche. In the bilingual earlier film, she is cast opposite American William Hurt as Henry, whose neurosis, evoking for one reviewer the troubled heroes of the novels of Paul Auster (Ardan 1996), manifests itself through aphasia. Linguistic failure is therefore expressly connected with the English language. It is moreover contrasted with the greater linguistic and existential ease demonstrated by Binoche's French-speaking character, who in this film actually takes over Henry's psychoanalysis practice and becomes his patients' preferred consultant, despite her lack of training (although, in a joke about psychoanalysis, both analysts' speech is generally limited to 'hmm'-ing during sessions). In *Décalage horaire*, six years later, aphasia is swapped for logorrhea to the same end of associating English with dysfunction. As Rollet (2008: 100) notes, one feature of male protagonist Félix's cultural disorientation is his Franglais, as he readily imports almost entire phrases, often those with a particular cultural significance as American (*'les happy ends c'est du bullshit'*/'happy endings are bullshit'). It is also interesting that virtual communication looms large in Rose's Gallic indictment of the world from which Félix has hailed, in her spectacularly conceptually conflated allusion to the triptych of 'the web, globalisation and terrorism', revealing the extent to which this film addresses, albeit playfully, contemporary anxiety around 'famous high-tech solitudes under the empire of the internet' (Vasse 2008: 77) – the notion that the more resources of communication are open to us in the post-technological world, the less real exchange takes place. Here this negative apprehension bypasses technology per se to become simply associated with America itself. There is no doubt concern about the decline of the French language behind such vigorous endorsements of it in these narratives.

In contrast, the more recent (2008) film *LOL* is characterised by an enthusiastic embrace of cultural and linguistic hybridity, including at the level of dialogue. This fits with the narrative's youth-orientation (relatively new in French cinema, where explicitly youth-oriented films have been more associated with television), which is most obvious in a soundtrack stuffed with – mostly English-language – pop songs, from Rolling Stones classics to contemporary hits by the likes of, as well as Supergrass, Alvin and the Chipmunks. Additionally, not only does the film's rapid editing style flirt with a music video aesthetic, but the fact that here not only significant elements of English but especially *Franglais* are incorporated into its spoken idiom speaks to the younger demographic's association with linguistic experimentation and change. Thus the *lycéens* on whom the film focuses – and especially those like Isabelle de Peyrefitte who are associated with a self-consciously cool pose – routinely insert single English words into their statements, usually where a French word would have done just as well (for example, '*Elle va passer la meilleure soirée de sa life* [not *vie*]'/'She'll have the night of her life'). Of course, the main area in which *Franglais* has flourished precisely because the French language will arguably *not* do as well is in the realm of the digital and technological revolution. Virtual communication – via text and online messaging – is also a major mode of communication here, as acknowledged by the title's quotation of an acronym that evolved in these arenas. Palmer (2011: 27-9) has written about the use of virtual communication in another French youth narrative also starring *LOL*'s Christa Theret and whose release in 2007 preceded it by just one year, Lola Doillon's *Et toi, t'es sur qui?/Just About Love?*. His analysis proves useful for considering its portrayal in the later film, not least since in both cases classical conventions for filming conversation are often observed even when the exchanges

are virtual. For Palmer, the portrayal of a world where ‘Orange and MSN rule’ (Kaganski 2007: 44) speaks to contemporary fears about the high numbers of French children with mobile phones and internet access and attests to the spread of globalisation. This is negatively constructed in *Et toi t’es sur qui*’s bleak and cynical portrayal of generally loveless teenage relations in a way that is not true of *LOL*’s exuberant celebration of friendships and romance; however both films do bear witness to the ever-increasing reach of US-led global culture. In the case of Azuelos’ narrative, this is certainly inseparable from the penetration of English into the French language. Indeed, the film reflects the encroachment of the English language onto not only youth culture but especially feminine youth culture, as through women’s fashion magazines or ‘*la presse people*’.

The soundtrack of *LOL* also illustrates the ongoing relevance of a comment by Grossvogel (2005: 73-4): that romantic comedies often introduce incongruous elements into their love-songs. Grossvogel alludes specifically to new interpretations of old favourites, which for him allows them to preserve their nostalgic value with a pinch of humour added, distanced as ‘fun’. However, incongruous versions stress songs’ status as quotation and incongruousness can come, too, from English itself. This occurs in *LOL* with Jean-Philippe Verdin’s ‘Little Sister’. This song is for the purposes of the narrative performed by the male lead Maël, teen heartthrob (since the film’s success) Jérémy Kapone, during a central sequence providing a turning point in his relationship with the eponymous Lola, when they begin to admit their romantic leanings more openly. Thematically, it mythologises Lola and Maël’s relationship, based on friendship (‘We used to say that we were brother and sister’). What is unusual is that, unlike with the simulated Americanness of *Essaye-moi*’s English-language song, this piece is performed in a slightly accented French whose

charm is magnified by the context and the performance's initial breathy hesitancy. In other words the (false) sense of quotation is here cultural rather than specific: the number deliberately masquerades as not only a borrowing but an imperfect translation.

It is noteworthy that these films, as well as invoking the English language, tend too to pastiche global genres: primarily the teenpic in *LOL*, the most formulaic strain of *rom-com* itself in *Décalage* and musical romance in *Un divan*, which closes on a version of Cole Porter's 'Night and Day' and which one critic calls a 'postmusical', likening the dialogue to spoken songs and the background sounds during certain sequences to music (Martin 1997: 39). Similarly, sections of dialogue in *Mariages!* are in English thanks to a proportion of British guests at the titular wedding: upper-class bores exported straight out of *Four Weddings*. A rumour that Kenneth Branagh may be attending further cements the film's alignment to a tradition that is in this case more immediately recognisable as British than American.⁵⁸

There is a distinction to be made here, too, between the light in which British and American cultures are constructed, even through a common language. The mention of Branagh in *Mariages!* references British comedy as rooted in the venerated Shakespearean tradition. Another paradigmatic example, here, is *Le Gout des autres*, in which protagonist Castella's exclusion from the intellectual clique whose membership he covets is demonstrated memorably by a cringe-making scene in which he declares his love to the English teacher Clara through a rudimentary love poem written in an English full of errors and misconceived metaphors, such as 'when

⁵⁸ This is also another film that suggests the legacy of the Almodóvarian universe, through the inclusion of a transvestite stripper among the guests at the party, sorely out of place amid the film's bourgeois milieu.

I look at this woman my hearts gets a tan'.⁵⁹ This view of British culture as the preserve of an intellectual elite is a far cry from stereotypes of brash America. Yet, as we will see in reviewing reception later in the chapter, more often than not the two are in fact to greater or lesser extents lumped together in the French rom-com.

These and other texts, then, locate the effects of globalisation, and their ambivalence about it, in the realm of language. In line with the variety of attitudes to globalisation tracked in this chapter, while some films betray a similarly protectionist attitude to that of linguists, like René Étiemble in his well-known 1964 book *Parlez-vous franglais?*, who have long bemoaned Anglicisms' increasing purchase on French, others appear to welcome the phonic and semantic possibilities afforded by the English language's burgeoning status as a *lingua franca*. It is worth reminding ourselves, though, that such films nevertheless remain dominated by the French language with all its national and cultural associations. Nowhere is this paradigm of dabbling in the external within a recognisably French context better summed up than on a first viewing of the DVD version of *LOL*, as Supergrass' 'Alright' over the menu gives way to the French language – although transnationally produced – song 'Je ne veux pas travailler' by Pink Martini during the opening credits.⁶⁰ As if this were not enough, as protagonist Lola's voiceover introduces shots of herself and her girlfriends, she explains that the film is played in slow-motion as 'that's what happens when you meet the best-looking girls in American TV series', adding, 'OK, we don't do that much in France, but it's stylish'. This comment sums up the film's attitude towards American narration (slow-motion entrances occur not only in

⁵⁹ For a fuller analysis of this scene from the point of view of expressing love see Harrod (2013).

⁶⁰ Later, *Lol*'s soundtrack alludes to a truly French cinematic past, borrowing a refrain from *La Boum*, the breakthrough film for Marceau and another story about a teenaged girl which provides a constant reference point for reviewers.

American television but also numerous iconic Hollywood films of recent decades, from *Reservoir Dogs* [Quentin Tarantino, USA 1992] to the rom-com *Clueless* [Amy Heckerling, USA 1995]) and provides a convenient bridge to discussing overt transatlantic reflexivity in French rom-coms.

Reflexive Romance

As modes of communication, pastiche and cinephilia may enjoy more importance today than ever before in cinema (Hoesterey 2001: 46) and they are of paramount importance in contemporary French cinema specifically (Palmer 2011: 195-215). Romantic comedy is no exception. In this section I will briefly examine just two French films that exemplify the dominant new romantic trend for explicit citation of pre-existing romantic texts by referring insistently to hit Hollywood rom-coms. These are *Décalage horaire* and Marc Gibaja's less successful but no less generically interesting *Ma Vie n'est pas une comédie romantique/It Had to be You* (2007). Finally, I will briefly show how a film from the end of the period, *Les Émotifs Anonymes/Romantics Anonymous* (Jean-Pierre Améris, 2010), translates awareness of the rom-com's ongoing status as an immigrant even as it is increasingly integrated into French cinema.

Initially conceived for Hollywood production by a writer-director who has lived in the USA, *Décalage horaire* distinguishes itself in being the only French rom-com to date to have received a sustained critical commentary - also from the perspective of transnational exchange, explicitly contrasting the film with Hollywood predecessors (Rollet 2008). The key intertexts for this film are a screwball comedy, *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, USA 1934), an allusion spotted by Rollet, and two more recent hits, *When Harry Met Sally* and paradigmatic

new romance *Pretty Woman*. Resonance with Capra's film occurs through the couple's meeting in an airport, updating the classic film's bus station, and because a large chunk of the narrative takes place in the hotel bedroom which they are forced through circumstance to share, prompting gentle squabbling across the central axis that cannot but recall the iconic scene where Claudette Colbert and Cary Grant bicker across the makeshift partition of a sheet hung between beds.

Jumping forward half a century, *When Harry Met Sally's* status as a reference point will already be obvious from the comparison cited earlier in this chapter, offered by one review, between Binoche and Meg Ryan. This is particularly manifest during a dinner scene in which Rose re-enacts Sally's iconic frankness about the female orgasm (Sally fakes one loudly in a restaurant), with a more sophisticated nuance. When Félix asks Rose how she could enjoy sex with a man she no longer loves (her ex), Rose unexpectedly replies that she has been 'faking it' for years with a man whom she still loves – although, we know, she has elected to leave him because he is abusive. Binoche's knowing, teasing smile as she delivers the line, the measured and deliberate manner in which she reveals something potentially shocking and, above all, a languorous, licking play of cutlery at her mouth all combine to put the knowing viewer immediately in mind of the moment that defined *When Harry's* then audaciously modern sensibility.

As for the intertext with *Pretty Woman*, not only does Reno's neurotic businessman Félix recall Richard Gere's misunderstood Wall Street shark Edward (both also blighted by unresolved Oedipal complexes) and Binoche's emotional, initially heavily 'done-up' beautician Rose Julia Robert's 'tart-with-a-heart' Vivian; specific narrative moments echo those of the earlier film. One of these is the classic device of revealing the female character's true beauty, through the removal of a wig

in *Pretty Woman* and the layer of clownish makeup in *Décalage*. The other concerns dialogue book-ending Thompson's film with a postmodern frame that invokes *Pretty Woman* and a certain simplistic conception of Hollywood entertainment as a whole: an opening voiceover in which Rose wishes life could be like films where 'whores marry millionaires' and a closing one where Félix reflects that 'Hollywood happy endings are bullshit'.

Multiplying the intertextual echoes reverberating through this film is one way in which my own analysis differs from Rollet's, since she only acknowledges the classical allusion – a more 'respectable' reference point for French cineastes than contemporary Hollywood, as I will argue in more detail in discussing this genre's reception later in this chapter. I also wish to add a transnational dimension to her feminist reading of the film. Specifically, in relation to the revelation of beauty scene in *Décalage*, for Rollet (ibid: 103) Rose's shedding of her 'mask' of makeup represents liberation from society's rules regarding femininity. While this is true, it ignores the comically excessive character of the makeup. Its shedding represents a return to Binoche's naturalistic dramatic persona, which is iconically French par excellence. This visual intensification of Binoche's representation of Frenchness only parallels the recuperation of Hollywood star Reno by the French industry in the film, humorously acknowledged in the narrative by the fact that his character is a French chef who has 'defected' to the US only to find misery and divorce. His romance with Rose, who is so attached to French heritage she cries when the news shows footage of the Fourth Republic, represents the comforting return to the motherland – or perhaps the fatherland, given the unconventional ending uniting him not (physically) with his new love but with his estranged father, in rural Burgundy. Since the two - both chefs - fell out over Félix's unorthodox cooking ideas, there is

also an implication of a return to traditional French methods in this arena. National values thus triumph at both textual and extra-textual levels and it is ultimately not just Rose and Félix who are brought together, but the Hollywood rom-com and the French film industry, on the latter's terms.

Rollet's interpretation of *Décalage*'s self-aware framing dialogue, meanwhile, reproduces an anti-Hollywood prejudice she identifies with French film studies as a whole. She claims, specifically, that this example of reflexivity constitutes a specifically French touch of originality to 'elevate [...] the film to more than a genre film, or at least to superior genre fare' (ibid: 99-100). This argument is untenable in view of the fact that self-referentiality is now a well-established, defining feature of contemporary Hollywood rom-coms. Not only that but in fact Félix's closing remarks pastiche the ending of *Pretty Woman*, where a street performer proclaims: 'This is Hollywood, land of dreams'. In other words, while Rollet makes convincing arguments about the adaptation of a US model for French audiences, such as through the use of local locations and stars, she somewhat overstates the radical originality of the French version against the Hollywood model.

The other French example of this highly self-reflexive transnational trend, *Ma vie n'est pas une comédie romantique*, also invokes more than one specific pre-existing rom-com. Here the key quotations are all more recent: in this order, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *When Harry Met Sally* and *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, UK/USA 2003). The film opens with a black screen, while a male voiceover tells us that people who love rom-coms tend to be suspected of having failed in their own emotional life, then discusses such texts' power to manipulate the viewer's emotions: 'like a fool, you always feel a lump in your throat'. After the voice has confirmed that 'this rom-com fan' is a failure in love, we hear snippets of the

narrative-defining radio broadcast dialogue from *Sleepless in Seattle*, then see images from the film, before a reverse shot shows its male viewer reclining on a sofa in front of the television on which it is playing. The apartment surrounding our ‘speaker’ is being emptied of furniture: the home (his voiceover tells us) he shared with the girlfriend with whom he has recently broken up. This melodramatic opening strongly recalls Ephron’s tale of male bereavement and dysfunctional singlehood, an impression reinforced when we ‘meet cute’ our hero Thomas’ (Gilles Lellouche) future love object, bubbly Ryan-esque blonde Florence (Marie Gillain).

At the same time, this initial meeting – which takes place in the wall-to-wall pink of a toilet roll aisle at a supermarket – marks a turning point towards Ryan’s earlier hit rom-com, *When Harry Met Sally*, in that the protagonists are old schoolmates (and sweethearts). This intertext dominates the central body of the narrative. When Thomas inadvertently prompts Florence’s split from her long-term partner (by listing the giveaway signs of adultery as he experienced them from his ex), the two become close friends who share their romantic and other fears, as in Reiner’s film. Although this narrative is set over a shorter space of time than its predecessor (a few months rather than many years), the meandering pace of a narrative constructed around individual scenes and vignettes, with little effort made to connect them, recalls the earlier film. So does the couple’s habit of calling each other by their full names and maintaining forced formality at times, such as by shaking hands with one another. The comparison is further underlined as the narrative progresses, both by the presence of a poster for Reiner’s film visible in the background at a cinema’s ‘Romantic Comedy Week’ and by a sequence at a New Year’s Eve party (like the climax of *When Harry*) in which Florence’s permed hair and 1980s bouffant-necked, off-the-shoulder dress make her Sally’s double. Most

recognisable of all is the pivotal scene in which the friends fall into bed together, in both cases following on immediately from the man's encounter with his significant ex and his resulting arrival at the woman's house late at night for support. Afterwards, too, there is a direct parallelism in the way we cut to each member of the couple discussing the event with a third party, as well as in their transparently insincere insistence that sexual relations should not continue lest they jeopardise the friendship.

Only in the final act does *Love Actually* make a – less explicit – appearance. Firstly, a scene in which Florence's ex conveys his ongoing love for her via written placards pastiches Mark's (Andrew Lincoln) declaration to Juliet (Keira Knightley) in Curtis' film. Shortly afterwards, a conversation between Thomas and Florence's son Lucas about the young boy's lovelife, played with deadly seriousness, imitates the relationship between *Love Actually*'s widow Daniel (Liam Neeson) and his romantically precocious stepson Sam. Finally, it is this plotline, too, that is echoed in the climactic sequence of *Ma vie n'est pas*, set in an airport, when – like Sam – Florence tries to force her way past an official in order to reach her love before they fly away to the USA.

The fact that, unlike Sam, Florence fails to get past the official in *Ma Vie n'est pas* relates to the precise nature of this film's relationship to pre-existing rom-com models. Where *Décalage horaire* commented on Franco-US relations as a whole, this text is in dialogue with the generic tradition itself and, as its title promises, this is not limited to an unquestioning embrace. Precisely by invoking not just general but specific conventions and models, the text is consistently pointing up its own artifice – the same contrivance which its opening voiceover at once vaunts and deplores ('like an idiot, you feel a lump in your throat' [my emphasis]). This

extends to anti-realist aesthetics, intensifying the look and sound of the rom-coms mimicked at times to the point of caricature. One example is an acting style that veers between broad naturalism and performativity (Lellouche's histrionic 'crying' scenes). Occasional highly pictorial figure arrangement, as when Thomas and his colleague are momentarily shot from overhead lying on a black background with yellow polka-dots, reminiscent of a board game, with no narrative explanation, tends too to make of them stick figures. In general, the appearance of sets is even more jarring than the acting style. The pink toilet roll scene is representative of the film's use of bright colours and extreme contrasts, notably in Florence's new-build home (not unlike the backdrop to *De l'autre côté du lit*), where white walls are decorated with bright red stencilled flowers. This is matched at one point by deliberately fake-looking splodges of red on her face as she cleans, complete with tea-towel tied theatrically round her head. Another special effect so obvious as to appear intentionally foregrounded is the occasional use of flat, almost cartoonish rear projections, while a head-on shot of Thomas and a friend 'driving a car', with the surroundings shrouded in darkness, looks more static than equivalent efforts from the 1930s.

Such creakily ersatz visual illusionism, underlining the distance of this film from its apparent ancestors, is complemented by a similarly heavy-handed score. This is so insistently composed of cheerily repetitive, plonking piano jazz as to completely cull any emotional impact from several key scenes. Not only that but more than one English-language classic is used but rerecorded in a strangely distorted version, as with a slowed down, croaky-voiced and almost mournful rendition of 'Let's fall in love' during the first sex scene. This evokes the couple's own hesitant relationship with the romantic notion of *falling* in love; rather, they

initially decide on a strictly rule-governed agreement to remain friends while sleeping together – which fails when their feelings conform to the romantic stereotype of overcoming them.

Despite a romantic thread coursing through the narrative, the happy ending is enacted in an even more heavily self-questioning mode than the rest of the film. The final act opens with the *Star Trek*-themed mock wedding of Florence's daughter Lisa to Thomas' colleague Bill. This ties up a subplot dreamt up partly to create conflict between the film's protagonists, as Bill is much older than under-age Lisa. Nonetheless, the presence of both Lisa and Florence's younger son Lucas in the narrative represents an interest in maternal concerns that I have earlier argued is a characteristic feature of French romantic comedy. Furthermore, by forcing Florence and Thomas to see one another again, the wedding speaks to the true practical difficulties associated with the break-up of long-term relationships where families are concerned and actually casts the romantic marriage narrative, one version of life-long commitment, as science fiction. In this setting, Florence makes her final love declaration, only to have Thomas tell her she has left it too late. She then chases him to the airport, in an archetypal Hollywood climax sequence around a deadline structure, only to have an official block her path to the plane. After 'miraculously' attracting Thomas' attention using sun reflected off her compact mirror, she meets him on the runway, the two running to each other in a joyous slow-motion that accentuates the moment's impact, only to have this 'impact' literalised as a bus runs Thomas down. This second *deus ex machina* plot event is so abrupt that it emphasises the contrivance of final sequences like this one. With the audience well and truly shaken up, it only remains for Florence to turn, for the first time, directly to the camera and give a gentle shake of her head, before we dissolve to a present day

shot of the pair filmed head-on. Now both the passage of time and the shaking off of the couple's earlier, generically stereotyped personae are signalled by the loss of Thomas' beard and Florence's newly dark hair, as they explain to the audience that this was not of course how it happened. Rather, more prosaically, Florence simply accompanied Thomas to New York, an admission that prompts banal remarks – and a bickering dynamic – around the sale of her house. Romance is replaced, in other words, by everyday practicalities: as Florence and Thomas put it, 'routine, basically'. In a final flourish, however, just when the film appears to have declared its hand, a reverse shot shows that the couple are seated before a view of Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge. As Deborah Jermyn (2009: 10-13) has noted, New York – and 'the island' especially, often seen over the Hudson river – 'has evolved as the preeminent and most memorable location adopted by the Hollywood rom-com', 'constitut[ing] the quintessence of faith in the possibility and attainability of romance'. Reinforcing this romantic overlay, Florence's muffled conversation with Thomas suggests that 'things have never been so perfect'.

The vacillating ending of *Ma Vie n'est pas une comédie romantique*, torn between romantic idealism and clear-sighted realism, epitomises the film's overall stance of wishing both to 'have its cake and eat it', to enjoy romantic clichés while recognising them as such. Although this is typical of Hollywood new romance, it must be said that in including such a large volume of blatant allusions to its own status as a formulaic text, the film appears by and large to have failed to work as an involving narrative, given that it drew only 104,000 spectators in France, by comparison with the subtler (and more star-led) *Décalage horaire*'s over a million. Both films, though, demonstrate their filmmakers' felt need to acknowledge the

influence of the Hollywood rom-com on the French genre as formative and inevitable, but as a source of creativity rather than constraint.

This influence is much more diluted yet still perceptible by 2010 in *Les Émotifs anonymes*. A high-concept rom-com following rigorously the arcs of two characters beset by pathological shyness, the film stars actors who are well-known in France but barely recognisable elsewhere, Isabelle Carré and comic A-lister Benoît Poelvoorde. It is set in a French provincial town against the backdrop of the hand-crafted chocolate industry. Despite its extreme French-ness, however, this setting lends a flavour of anachronism, which in turn creates an effect of distance comparable to those achieved by the highly self-reflexive acknowledgements about texts' cultural provenance included in the previous examples. The genre appears in all cases deterritorialised.

This section has attempted to illustrate some of the ways in which the films of the corpus invoke a so-called Anglo-Saxon tradition through content, form, aesthetics and language. These are often combined with thematic allusions too numerous to enunciate; however, the following discussion will focus on one specific instance of thematic interaction with the external culture that is highly revealing about filmmakers' attitudes towards that culture.

The Anglo-Saxon Other... (Wo)Man

In this section I wish to examine a particularity of some French rom-coms, namely the casting of the conventional rom-com character of the 'other man' – or occasionally woman – as American or, less often, British. This occurs often enough to be remarkable and to betray French filmmakers' complex attitude towards the (trans-)national otherness these characters represent. In short, the identity termed in

France Anglo-Saxon is in this way made doubly other, by being allotted a negatively constructed generic position defined as lacking knowable subjectivity.

In the cases of American other men, the definitive status of this nationality as sufficient to stand in for more three-dimensional characterisation is apparent in a tendency for this to be almost these characters' *only* distinctive trait.⁶¹ So it appears in *Ce soir je dors chez toi*, when hero Alex is confronted in a hotel room by a romantic rival who is bland in appearance and polite if distant in the momentary snatch we glimpse of him. Before setting upon him, Alex calls him simply a 'fucking American'. Similarly – but substituting British-ness – in *Je crois que je l'aime*, protagonist Lucas' unseen former girlfriend, who turned out to be a spy for a rival company, is known simply as '*l'Anglaise*' ('the Englishwoman').⁶² A trusted chauffeur immediately tells Lucas how much he prefers the new lady on the scene, Elsa, played by respected star Sandrine Bonnaire.

Elsewhere, as if to heighten the implication of American 'greatness' in the sense of global visibility, the trait of this nationality is coupled with celebrity status, as in *Ma vie n'est pas une comédie romantique* and *Ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d'enfants*. In the first film, Thomas runs into his ex on the arm of a friendly black – and therefore also racially other – American, to whom Florence later refers as '*the Dexter Coleman?*'. Thomas' humiliation is heightened by the fact that he is in the middle of an acupuncture session and has needles hanging out of his face. His confusion and shock are betrayed by his mumbled and incoherent attempt to speak English, as he responds to the news that the couple met in New York with the

⁶¹ Recent auteur cinema has also been known to use the Anglo-Saxon other in this way, as notably in *5x2* (Ozon, 2004), where his American accent is one of the only concrete features of the faceless stranger with whom the female lead betrays her new husband.

⁶² The two 'loose' hippie women whom Laurent visits for extra-marital fun in *Gazon maudit*, the Crumble sisters, are also English, as their name emphasises.

dumb pronouncement ‘New York, yes yes, zee buildings’. The fact that at the end of the film Thomas ‘conquers’ New York – and presumably the English language – by relocating there traces a narrative movement to neutralise fears of exclusion from the globalised world. In *Ils se marièrent*, the other man vying for Vincent’s place in his wife Gabrielle’s romantic universe is played by pin-up Johnny Depp (although British actor Keith Allen also makes a brief appearance before being gently rebuffed by Gabrielle).

Cultural and linguistic fear of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ other is even more clearly on display in Attal’s earlier film *Ma femme est une actrice*. I already have described the extensive references to American musical and film culture, conceived as explicit quotation or homage, in the film’s opening. However, thematically the text conflates a portrayal of French masculinity in crisis with an exploration of French nationality in crisis, largely through the dialogical other of British culture (as also in *L’Arnacoeur* – see case study).⁶³ The narrative follows Attal’s character Yvan during his wife’s sojourn in London on a shoot, as he becomes increasingly paranoid about her acting opposite an older but much lusted after British actor, John, played by 1960s icon Terence Stamp. The fact that Stamp has enjoyed a stellar film career including working with the canonical auteur Pier Paolo Pasolini, given Attal’s would-be auteur status and this film’s overt focus on the difficulties for an ordinary man of being married to a celebrity, constitutes a self-flagellating joke of its own. In terms of national belonging, Yvan’s exclusion-anxiety – from his wife’s friendship with John and generally from the Anglophone culture to which Gainsbourg famously belongs on her mother’s side – is played out through language, in one humorous

⁶³ These two crises are also spliced together elsewhere in French cinema, often made a source of nervous humour, as for example in auteur and comic hits respectively *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) and *Brice de Nice* (see also Chion 2008: 138-44; 168-73).

scene in particular. Following Yvan's sudden arrival in London, prompted by paranoia about John's reputation, the trio converse awkwardly in the restaurant trailer on the shoot. Initially, Yvan is unfriendly, answering John's polite small-talk with monosyllables. Catching his wife's reproachful eye, though, he explains that the language barrier is stopping him from saying more (although not, he adds pointedly, from observing all proceedings with a careful eye). There follows a banal passage in which John compliments Yvan on his English but mispronounces his name as the woman's name *Yvonne*, prompting an immediate correction from Yvan. Shortly afterwards, as talk turns to matters Gallic, it is the Frenchman's turn to get his own back, looking blank when faced with John's mediocre but passable pronunciation of French proper names, including a place name and a type of cheese, before correcting them with gusto. What is interesting here is the way in which Frenchness is emasculated, through the feminised label *Yvonne*, prompting the petty display in which Yvan regains the linguistic high ground for a moment – although later scenes including a nationalistically-inflected fantasy of shoving a large cheese into John's face confirm that his paranoia is far from having been assuaged. In terms of spectator positioning, because Yvan is both the ultimate master of the discourse in this scene and the film's auteur and main protagonist, we are aligned with his perspective in mocking the Anglo-Saxon other. The phrase Anglo-Saxon (rather than simply British) is particularly apt considering John's depiction as a star who, despite clipped speech and 'European' cultural pretension, also has something of California and the global Hollywood movie-star about him, as through his penchant for Tai-Chi before breakfast. It is not insignificant that, although Charlotte and John do not have an affair, several narrative details (John's solicitous friendliness towards her and pointed echoing of her own 'silly' love of the Eiffel Tower, his roué behaviour in

flirting with a young crew member when Charlotte is unavailable) suggest Yvan was right to fear him as a rival. At the end of the film, threats to Yvan's marriage are swept aside by Charlotte's pregnancy, or the absorption of any residual foreignness into French futurity, rather than any kind of *détente* with the feared other.

The other man is not the only position occupied by Britons and Americans in French romantic comedy. Elsewhere, depictions are sometimes even more outrageously insulting, as with an American film producer in *Au suivant!*, apparently inspired by Samuel Fuller, whose portrayal as a capricious and unreasonable bully prompts *Les Inrockuptibles*' reviewer to denounce the comparison as entirely unjustified (Anon 2005a). Sometimes, too, they are considerably more favourable. Although I have argued that *Décalage horaire* and *Un divan à New York* constitute reassuring appropriations of global models within French parameters, the fact that the American(/ised) characters in these films are the leading men and not the rival suggests a greater willingness to engage with otherness. This is also the case more recently in *Jusqu'à toi* (Jennifer Devolder, 2009). *Cliente* goes further, having director-actress Balasko's character Irène emigrate to a Wild West landscape with an American Indian, who is idealised as an 'exotic' romantic hero. These examples give a sense of the variety of reactions to the global, English-speaking other on show in the genre. I will now turn to its reception in order to trace a similarly broad and complex spread of attitudes.

Reception of the Rom-Com

While the anxieties aired by rom-com narratives around other men and outsiders can be seen to relate to globalisation in a generalised way, I hinted in Chapter 1 that today it is primarily in the realm of culture – indeed, in the post-war years perhaps

first and foremost film culture – that the threat of envelopment by US ‘imperialism’ has been most keenly debated (cf. Kuisel 1993: 230). This section will examine the way in which press reaction to the incorporation of the rom-com genre in France enters into this debate.

The first point to note is critics’ increasing recognition of the genre in the French film landscape over the period, broadly in tandem with the shift by distributors and marketing agencies towards promoting films more overtly as romantic comedies referred to in the introduction to this thesis. Before the mid-2000s, films are almost without exception simply not described as *comédies romantiques* by distributors or critics but rather by such adjacent titles as *comédies sentimentales* or *comédies de mœurs* (roughly, ‘comedies of manners’), with telltale adjectives like ‘light-hearted’ or ‘tender’ in descriptions giving away their generic allegiance (and sometimes providing a compass for this research). One of the first direct allusions to the genre’s explosion appears as late as February 2005, in weekly news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*’s review of Balasko’s *L’Ex-femme de ma vie*, immediately casting the genre as exogenous with the remark that ‘making a romantic comedy *à la française* is French cinema’s current fad’ (Anon 2005c). Nearly two years later, another weekly news magazine, *L’Express*, in response to the success of *Je vous trouve très beau* (2005), *Hors de prix* and *Prête-moi ta main* (both 2006), dedicated an article to the phenomenon (Carrière 2006). This article, revealingly, pinpoints reluctance on the part of French filmmakers themselves to embrace the term ‘comédie romantique’, quoting both *Hors de prix* director Salvadori and also the director of 2006 rom-com/drama *Quand j’étais chanteur/The Singer*, Xavier Giannolli. This bears out the suggestion that filmmakers themselves internalise anti-Hollywood prejudice (cf. Rollet 2008: 94). Giannolli also duplicates this same

prejudice, by claiming (like Rollet herself) that French cinema subverts rather than reproduces generic codes (before contradicting himself by suggesting that romantic comedy is a French genre invented by Marivaux). This article appears to capture a watershed moment following which the press begins a rapid about turn towards acceptance of romantic comedy's existence as a French genre. Indeed, the same year, *Télérama* refers to *Toi et moi* as a '*comédie romantique labelisée*' (Guichard 2006), or 'formulaic rom-com'. This magazine appears a little ahead of the curve here: the following year, an article in weekly news magazine *Marianne* entitled 'The Boom in Sugar-Coated Films of the Heart' reviewing *Je crois que je l'aime* (2007) by Jolivet, a director associated with socially committed comedies (see O'Shaughnessy 1997: 57; 66), refers to this film as a *comédie romantique*, but in inverted commas (Anon 2007b). Subsequently, the distancing quotation marks disappear definitively from reviews of many comparable films and by the end of the decade the label is entirely standardised at all levels of the written press.

Beyond this picture of gradual acceptance, the ways in which articles in the mainstream and cinephilic press frame the French rom-com as a US import reveal several trends that are worth analysing in more detail. I will divide these into the following categories: articles denigrating the global genre, articles decrying the failings of the French genre in the light of its relationship to global models and, finally, straightforward celebrations of the global genre and its legacy for France. Within these groups, a double standard with respect to classical and contemporary Hollywood is discernible. So too is a certain correlation between the manifestation of some discourses and particular strands of the press.

I. 'Hollywood soup-merchants'

While the opening chapter of this thesis gave some examples of the way in which romantic comedy is belittled in both a global and a French context, this section will focus on how the French press' circumspection about the genre is very frequently tied to its perceived Americanness.

Regarding negative constructions of Hollywood cinema, some journalists and also filmmakers are quite explicit. For example, Arnaud Viard's (2004) review of *Clara et moi* in *Le Nouvel Observateur* comments that this rom-com/drama exploring the social issue of HIV compares favourably with what he calls simply '*les comédies* made in Hollywood'. In this locution, the American industry itself stands for unspecified negative values and the use of English underlines the writer's distasteful distance from his 'bad object'. Similarly, revered auteur Alain Resnais, whose films *Smoking/No Smoking* (1993) and *On connaît la chanson* (1997) merit attention from the generic perspective of the rom-com, when quoted in a review of the latter film, seeks to strategically distance himself from those filmmakers he curtly dismisses as 'Hollywood soup-merchants' (see Frodon 1997). As one might expect from an auteur, it is the commercial conception and bland sameness he imputes to Hollywood that for him are intimately bound up with its industrial context.

The charge of lack of originality, often levelled against Hollywood in recent decades especially, with the rise of remakes, sequels and even prequels, also underlies many other critiques, which reference the genre with phrases like 'yet another...' (Anon 2006e) or 'an umpteenth...' (Anon 2007c; Carrière 2004). These disparaging remarks make no direct allusion to Hollywood, but, as we have seen, the genre was only fully embraced as a label within the French press around the mid-

2000s, suggesting that these writers can only be referring to the large body of global antecedents. Sometimes, too, a French film is favourably contrasted with a Hollywood one, on the grounds of having managed to ‘renew’ the genre (Anon 2007d).

More interesting are those critiques that take exception to a particular aspect of Hollywood cinema, such as Frodon’s (2006: 38) lukewarm review of *Prête-moi ta main* for *Cahiers du cinéma*, which displays characteristic hostility to the anti-auteurist US method by remarking that Lartigau might as well take his name off the credits, except ‘it’s the law, in France, that a film must have a director’. Occasionally, too, observations about cinema are situated in a much wider cultural field, as for example when popular director Aghion directly follows a pejorative assessment of what is often known in French discourse as ‘American political correctness’ with the rousing statement: ‘If comedy is a way of reaching a broad public and raising audience figures for European films, then long-live comedy!’ (see Tinazzi 2003). In such cases, it is apparent to what extent a single film provides a fulcrum for the expression of an anti-Americanism that is, in these respective cases, cultural and political.

II. Pale imitations

In opposition to the tendency to write Hollywood off, there emerges a self-abasing strand in the French press that holds Hollywood up as the more expert ‘other’ to purportedly lacklustre domestic genre filmmaking. Sometimes, the contrast is latent, implied simply by the fact that Hollywood is the definitive film culture of the Western world. For example, popular Sunday newspaper *Le Journal du dimanche* calls *Clara et moi* ‘excessively French’ (Théate 2006). More often, though, it is

explicit. For instance, the Communist daily *L'Humanité*, reviewing *Filles perdues, cheveux gras/Hypnotized and Hysterical (Hairstylist Wanted)* (Claude Duty, 2002) – another female-friendship rom-com containing a ‘rip-off’ of the iconic scene from gross-out rom-com classic *There's Something About Mary* (Bobby and Peter Farrelly, USA 1998) in which a beloved pet flies out of the window – elaborates on his summary assertion that the French are poor at making comedies by calling the film ‘more anodyne than the Farrelly brothers’ (Anon 2009b). More flatteringly to Hollywood, *L'Humanité* (again) argues that *Ma Vie n'est pas une comédie romantique* is much less moving than American versions (thereby largely missing the point of its self-conscious genre spoofing) (Anon 2007e). Interestingly, too, such an attitude can even be found in publications cited earlier as equally guilty of belittling Hollywood fare, such as when finance-focused newspaper *Les Échos* states that French rom-coms do not usually attain the same level of quality as the model on which they are based (Anon 2003a).

One publication that fairly often offers more fully elucidated comparisons of the two national cinematic traditions is *Les Inrockuptibles*, a self-consciously ‘cool’ weekly magazine dedicated to culture and that is famously pro-American/pro-global in its musical criticism. But its evaluations, too, are frequently guilty of a polarising slant, such as when Pierre-Marie Prugnard (1999) suggests in his review of *La Nouvelle Ève* that the influence of a US tradition ‘in which love thrives on opposition’ – the once again nameless rom-com tradition – makes the backdrop of Parisian intellectual cinema less lifeless, before lamenting the filmmaker’s inability to avoid reproducing certain current French cinematic fads. A more culturally nuanced example is Axelle Ropert’s (2009) suggestion, in her review of *Cliente*, that French cinema is less successful than Hollywood at treating the question of the

relationship between desire and money, despite frequently broaching it. For this critic, with the exception of Salvadori, French film directors do not manage as light-hearted a tone on this matter. This comment is informative, in that it acknowledges a certain Gallic lack of ease about wealth that I have already suggested may lie behind some criticism of mainstream cinema there. It represents in any case a sweeping and unsubstantiated derogation of French practice and artistry.⁶⁴

As in this case, when French reviews invoke concrete contrasts with Hollywood and cast the latter as superior to French practice, the contrasts are more often than not made against classical films, particularly in more intellectually constructed and cinephilic publications. If, as we have seen, repetition with too little variation is the scourge of some French genre critics, it is in some ways logical that contemporary rom-coms should receive shorter shrift than classical ones, by virtue of their belatedness. However, a fondness for classical Hollywood is also one of the defining traits of the pro-auteurist New Wave critics and filmmakers, whose legacy endures. It is hardly surprising, then, that filmmakers aligned with the auteur tradition like Jolivet and Corsini should call upon such giants of the classical American rom-com as Howard Hawks and Blake Edwards for Corsini (Grasseri 1999) or Lubitsch for Jolivet (Lipinska 2007) to contextualise their work. At the journalistic level, meanwhile, to cite just a couple of examples, *Positif*'s allusions in their review of *Décalage horaire* to director Thompson's 'unbearable attempts to cast Binoche as a faux "funny face" breakfasting at Roissy' (Anon 2002a), or

⁶⁴ Regarding the example of Salvadori, something of a specialist in Lubitsch-like plotting, reviews of his globally exported *Hors de prix* are interesting. The national press repeatedly picked up on its debt to classical Hollywood - and once again *Les Inrockuptibles* finds the French film lacking by comparison (Kaganski 2007); yet US reviews, which were more positive overall, stressed the film's Europeaness.

L'Humanité's desultory assessment of *Modern Love* as 'a pathetic imitation of former Hollywood models' (Ostria 2008), are typical.

These apparent contradictions in French critical practice confirm my key argument that generic structures are compatible with and can foster creativity. That is, while the New Wave critics tended to locate the brilliance of auteurs in their transcendence of the genre, my own perspective resituates such success as a virtuoso mastering of the genre's conventions. Since self-reflexivity is constitutive of genre as a concept, this includes playing with those conventions in such a way that auteur 'masterpieces' are as available for reinvention as any other texts – the very issue on which the criticisms cited in this section appear to hinge. The double standard that results from this blind spot, like the two broader trends for either condemning or praising Hollywood, corroborates Jameson's astute observation of the way in which value itself 'fatally programs every binary opposition into its good and bad, positive and negative, essential and unessential terms' (1992: 16).

III. American greats

However, there is some relief from this hitherto excessively single-minded picture. Some reviews at all ends of the journalistic spectrum praise Hollywood without offering France as a negative other. At the 'high' end especially, praise does tend to remain limited to classical Hollywood. Thus the generally complimentary review of *Romuald et Juliette* offered by *Positif* compares the film to *Sullivan's Travels* (Ramasse 1989) – not an immediately obvious reference. Even the less specialised *L'Express* invokes Hollywood icons of old Buster Keaton and Cary Grant, rather than contemporary slapstick comedians such as the equally pertinent Jim Carrey or Steve Martin, in its generally positive review of *Essaye-moi* (Libiot 2006).

Elsewhere, the contemporary US mainstream also appears as a positive reference point for French rom-coms. Rather unexpectedly, financial daily newspaper *La Tribune Desfossés* shows some tolerance for this cultural referent in a review of *La Nouvelle Ève*, invoking US sitcoms like *Ally McBeal* as positive models for the film. However, this attitude is tempered by the fact that later in the same article US television is actually cast as a refuge for auteurs too ‘seditious’ for Hollywood to handle (Bonnard 1999). A similar trend for qualified celebration of things American is discernible in *Télérama*, a listings magazine descended originally from Catholic publication *Radio-Télévision-Cinéma*, which counted André Bazin as its most illustrious contributor. While more mainstream than *Cahiers* and *Positif*, *Télérama* remains at the auteurist end of the weekly magazine spectrum: it is known for its arts coverage and in its genre is the ‘bible’ *de rigueur* for the educated middle-classes. A hospitable attitude towards transnational influence emerges, for example, in the review of *Au suivant!* featured in this publication, which alludes to ‘the sparkling recipe of Anglo-Saxon comedies’ and to the *Bridget Jones* franchise (Anon 2007a), while its appraisal of *Toi et moi* judges the film to have benefitted from elements taken from *Sex and the City* (Guichard 2006). There are two caveats applicable to these elegies. In the first case, Hollywood models again prove more palatable in France only when filtered through British culture. In the second, at the time of writing *Sex and the City* had not yet become a film and so was not strictly speaking a Hollywood product, suggesting the same further double standard as in *La Tribune*, where it is easier to relinquish cultural superiority in the uncontested realm of television than in nationally beloved film culture. All the same, it is important that these reviews identify the possibilities for enrichment of French film offered by global paradigms. *Au suivant!* becomes in this schema a ‘*Bridget Jones à la*

française'. The review of *Toi et moi* goes further, isolating positive aspects of a US tradition recognisable as linked to Hollywood and not just television, namely efficiency and charm. It simultaneously, though, mentions a feature which I have argued is more characteristic of French comedy: melodrama, described here as 'the hidden face of all good comedy'. This suggests a celebration of transnational hybridity that is more sophisticated than the usual take on the question of influence offered by many cinephilic newspapers and journals. The same is also true of *Les Inrockuptibles*, which seeks not only to compare but also on occasion to effect a rapprochement of French and US practices. Its review of *2 Days in Paris* is one example that bucks the trend, by praising the film not only through comparison with Sturges but also by vaunting its accommodation of a smattering of 'French bad taste' within an overall frame seen as more immediately American (Kaprièlian 2007). In this case, the eulogy is still, though, limited to the work of 'hip' auteur Delpy.

A clearer-cut distinction in attitudes towards North American models is visible in the reception of more mainstream films in the truly popular press, such as many daily newspapers or such publications as *Studio*, *Première* and *Cinélive*. Two salient examples are *Décalage horaire* and *Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches*. Regarding *Décalage*, while I have already detailed some of the hostile reaction to Thompson's film in the cinephilic press, by contrast *Première*'s Stéphanie Lamome (2002a) describes it in the following terms:

Amid the deluge of French comedies coming out for the start of the school year, here is one that provides some light relief from the cynical atmosphere our filmmakers hold so dear. At last a director (a woman, no less) ventures into the genre of sentimental comedy '*à l'américaine*' and earns her fairy-tale stripes. What is more, Danièle Thompson takes the risk – this time a very

French one – of shooting in a single location by focusing on two characters, unlike with the gallery of scattered portraits gone over with a fine tooth comb in *La Bûche*, the first outing for this brilliant screenwriter as director.

These comments present a number of revealing points. First is the implication that ‘cynicism’, the antithesis of the rom-com ethos, is a highly regarded value in French filmmaking circles. Second is the way in which the powerful links between popular and feminine modes as culturally ‘inferior’ are highlighted by the parenthetical aside ‘(a woman, no less)’. The ironic resonance of this barb is a function, in turn, of author Lamome’s own female gender, stamped in her name at the bottom of the page.⁶⁵ Next, the contrast this critic draws with Thompson’s first film, ensemble piece *La Bûche* suggests that her identification of the specificity of what she calls ‘a sentimental comedy “à l’américaine”’ (since in 2002 relatively widespread ease with the term ‘romantic comedy’ was still another four or five years away) resides pre-eminently in a dyadic narrative structure. This bears out my arguments in Chapter 4 about the ways in which this rom-com format bears the imprint of a North American culture that more openly prizes individualism than is the case in France. Lamome, however, does not make any such potentially censorious link between aesthetics and ideology. If anything, in fact, this particular contrast between American and French models is obscured, by the conflation of the dyadic focus with the apparently ‘very French’ (itself a dubious assertion) practice of shooting in one location. The vitality of a syncretic blend of Gallic and American traditions is in this way asserted. Going

⁶⁵ A relatively high number of rom-coms reviews across the board are the subject of reviews by female critics, attesting to the genre’s continued association with femininity, even as it becomes associated with both male performers and directors.

one step further, Lamome finally makes a virtue of another detail that might elsewhere have been construed as a negative aspect of Thompson's profile: her background as a successful screenwriter, including for television – the very history that assures her exclusion from the auteur category. In other words, Lamome goes out of her way to panegyrisé Thompson. If she bends observable fact to this end, this can be attributed to the position of 'inferiority' from which Thompson – and to an extent herself, as a female journalist working for a popular magazine – is operating. For Lamome's purposes, then, as with the many female filmmakers working in romantic comedy, Hollywood provides a reference point untainted by the insidious Gallic sexism circulating in national film discourse around popular entertainment as distinct from 'high art'.

Released just one year later, *Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches* is also directed by a woman associated with popular culture and television, comic troupe *Les Nuls*' writer-performer Chantal Lauby. This time almost exclusively feminine in its focus, the narrative focuses on the challenges faced by a single forty-something woman (Lauby) returning to the dating scene when her grown-up daughter leaves home. It also considers, to a lesser extent, her girlfriends' emotional lives. In reviews of the film there emerges something of an 'intellectual' versus popular divide, interlaced respectively with xenophobia and with hospitality, is apparent. Financial newspaper *Les Échos*, for example, criticises the film's 'lameness' (*'lourd[eur]'*) and especially the presence of a gay character described as 'seemingly obligatory in comedy' (Anon 2003b). As I have argued in Chapter 3, the increased volume of both primary and secondary gay characters in popular French cinema is a trend with well-established transnational roots. Cécile Mury's (2003) roundly negative appraisal for *Télérama*, meanwhile, includes an observation that the central group of women

recall characters from (British) global television comedy *Absolutely Fabulous*. Only slightly complicating the picture is a mixed review from the aesthetically elitist broadsheet *Libération*: ‘A rom-com, the film represents a simplified world where characters are only threatened by emotional troubles – a parade of fickle hearts somewhere between *Le Goût des autres* by Agnès Jaoui and *Décalage horaire* by Danièle Thompson. [...] It] offers a welcome naively sentimental refuge from today’s high voltage battlefields’ (Anon 2003d). Compliments here are extremely attenuated and the implicitly trivialising (‘fickle hearts’) references to other female-directed comedies follow the usual sexist pattern. By contrast, Christophe Narbonne’s (2003) review for *Première*, while also mixed (in his closing remarks he critiques the film’s showbiz setting as stereotypical and he finds the romance implausible), does not patronise aspects of the film which determine its popular generic status, such as its relatively exclusive focus on love and its sentimentality. Instead, while also opening by identifying the film as a rom-com, this review immediately interpellates Lauby’s fans with a reassurance that her character in the film retains elements of her ‘best’ stage and television incarnations. Like Lamome, then, Narbonne celebrates the film’s most popular, non-cinephilic elements. He then goes on to praise the ‘effectiveness’ of its comic elements in conjunction with its cinematography. Going one step further, mainstream daily newspaper *France-soir* dedicates not a review but an interview with Lauby to publicising the film, in which she aggrandises it as not so much a ‘women’s film’ as a ‘human beings’ film’.

This example foregrounds the importance of considering secondary coverage of films in addition to reviews and thereby the overall picture of how – and how extensively – rom-coms are represented in the French press. Here films’ positioning as auteur or mainstream fodder is if anything even more important. *Première*’s

review of *Décalage*, for instance, is complemented by a glossily illustrated two-page spread constructed around an interview with Thompson but also exploiting to the full Binoche's star status, through stills from the film and through its title 'Pretty Juliette' (Lamome 2002b) (also of course a reference to *Pretty Woman*, again championing cultural mixity). When we consider the question of space dedicated to films in this way, a particularly striking double standard applies to the more recent, unapologetically mainstream *De l'autre côté du lit*. Despite drawing 1.8 million spectators to the French box office, this broad comedy starring domestic mega-stars Boon and Marceau as a husband and wife who swap lives, and set in a household that looks like the set of an American sitcom, within the collections held by Paris' *Bibliothèque du Film*, is only the subject of short, fairly neutral reviews by four French newspapers.⁶⁶ These are *France-soir*, the more middle-class *Le Figaro* and its sister publication *Le Figaroscope* and finally – proving itself open-minded about cinema again — *La Tribune Desfossés*. This parsimonious coverage contrasts extremely with the response to auteur Balasko's *Cliente*, released the same year. Despite attracting only slightly more than a third of the cinema spectators of Pouzadoux's film (just under 700,000 entries), *Cliente* features in 15 of the general interest (or listings) newspapers and magazines held by the library and is also reviewed within *Cahiers du cinéma*, among its specialist periodicals. It might be noted that this film was not universally admired by critics any more than audiences. However, details like its blend of tones, its multiple protagonists and a naturalistic aesthetic make it feel French. At the same time, Balasko's popular auteur/star identity guarantees that the film enjoys the status of a cultural event, an effect

⁶⁶ While the BiFi collection is itself incomplete, its selection of reviews of *De l'autre côté* is indicative of the film's critical marginalisation.

reinforced by her frequent appearance on television chat shows not only to promote her own work directly but as a commentator on cultural and other current affairs.

To summarise this section, the global rom-com embodied first and foremost by Hollywood cinema is a constant landmark for the French genre, at both textual and extra-textual levels. In cinema itself, references include overt and narrative-defining intertextuality, a more diffuse stylistic emulation and specific, isolated instances of pastiche and imitation. Less directly, America itself, as well as Britain, is referenced in the rom-com by several films that include negatively constructed Anglophone ‘other’ men. Furthermore, even where the US is not an immediately recognisable reference point for filmmakers, Hollywood, and especially the Hollywood rom-com, makes its presence felt in the films’ reception, as a shadowy and often discomfiting mirror image, either berated for lowering the standard of French artistry or, conversely, for showing up the latter’s insufficiencies. These mutually contradictory attitudes illustrate the genre’s status as a point of convergence and a pretext for the working over of Gallic anxieties about the US’ dominance of the cultural, and occasionally also the political, field. However, despite the ongoing deprecation of popular and especially ‘Americanised’ fare in the cinephilic press, some reviews show that this rather self-negating and complex-ridden narrative is not the only one that can be and is beginning to be attached to the rise of the French rom-com *à la franco-américaine*, as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate more fully.

FROM FRANCE WITH LOVE: ROM-COM FOR EXPORT

In this section of the chapter I will argue that the French rom-com can be seen as transnational not only in the sense of having incorporated originally ‘foreign’

paradigms but also in feeding back into global film culture and so enhancing transnational cinema with particularities which are local in origin. With this aim, I will examine several cases whereby such transformed texts are positioned either in vain or successfully for export or remake abroad. It is important to note before proceeding that films less obviously produced with an eye on international markets may also find export markets, following domestic success – as for example with French mega-hit *Le Gout des autres*, which garnered over half a million dollars in the US as well as notching up profits in Europe, despite the lack of transnational reputation of its stars and its unspectacular Parisian milieu setting. However, my focus in this section is on those films that strike me as conceived intentionally for travel.

While scholarship in film studies often focuses on the dissemination of US culture, attention has also been given to the historical importance of on-screen ‘Frenchness’ as a reference point in global film culture, both in the post-war period (Shwartz 2007) and more recently, notably through stardom (see for example Vincendeau 2000b; Moine 2007b: 138-40). The French adoption of the rom-com can be seen in this light as a commercial strategy to extend the local industry’s transnationally conceived market share. Of course, it is also the case that global culture is part of French culture – that is, the same recourses that might appear to align a film with transnational modes can merely be intended to lend it a cosmopolitan ‘cool’ at home. Beyond this strategy, though, many rom-coms *have* exported internationally and in at least three cases remake rights have also been sold to Hollywood.

Thompson’s films provide a notable example of the rom-com’s export potential. First *La Bûche* did modest business (just under \$150,000) in the USA.

More significantly, *Décalage horaire*, originally conceived for Hollywood production by a director who lived in the US for many years, was distributed in 31 territories and took a respectable half a million dollars at the US box office. As for *Fauteuils d'orchestre*, benefitting from its choice as France's foreign-language Oscar entry, this film passed the \$2m mark in America, as well as being released in almost as many territories as *Décalage*. This relative global success is no doubt due in part to Thompson's choice of globally known actors, including Charlotte Gainsbourg, Emmanuelle Béart, Juliette Binoche, Jean Reno and Cécile de France. More recently, the export of films starring Audrey Tautou (*Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite, Hors de prix, De vrais mensonges*) confirms the key role played by transnational stars in selling films abroad. So does the substantial success in the US of Julie Delpy's *2 Days in Paris*, featuring the transnational director-actress herself opposite known American actor Adam Goldberg and which, thanks above all to the additional coup of choosing to film in English, grossed over \$4m. Furthermore, appearing in a rom-com that has exported can alter and broaden the international image of a French star. This is the case with Binoche, who since *Décalage* has appeared in the Hollywood rom-com *Dan in Real Life* (2007), where she plays an exotic, cosmopolitan eccentric (nationality unspecified) opposite Steve Carrell's all-American widower and father-of-three.

Prête-moi ta main – again perhaps thanks to Gainsbourg's presence – is a rom-com that enjoyed a UK release and has also sold its remake rights to Hollywood.⁶⁷ Moreover, its producer and star Chabat has an office there dedicated to

⁶⁷ Its not particularly catchy French title – literally 'lend me your hand', referring to the plot's pretend engagement – also appears to echo phonetically that of *Pretty Woman*. At the very least, it has surely been calculated to assure the film's place next to that classic of the genre on DVD retailers' shelves in the *comédie romantique* sections that are slowly appearing, for example at FNAC outlets.

developing similar products, suggesting the possibility of further French-inflected Hollywood rom-coms. The rights to the film that provides this chapter's case study, *L'Arnacoeur*, were also pre-sold to Universal Pictures. While any actual remake of these two films does not, however, appear immediately forthcoming, in the case of *LOL*, director Azuelos has already gone on to make a US version of the original, starring A-lister Demi Moore and child superstar Miley Cyrus.

While the politics of remakes are enormously influenced by anti-American sentiment, and it is true that these alternative versions tend to foreclose the possibility of the original film's release in a given territory, this example shows how the French rom-com enters into the transnationalisation of the film industry itself, through individual trajectories.⁶⁸ It also indicates an enormous potential amplification of the international exposure and success of filmmakers concerned. It is no accident that it should be a film such as *LOL*, that so knowingly emulates global models, which finds itself circulating back again into international film distribution channels.

In sum, although it is true that most French rom-coms have failed to tap into the large foreign markets to which most filmmakers would presumably welcome access, the second half of the 2000s has overseen a discernible shift, in the UK at any rate, with the rom-com for the first time becoming identifiable in the eyes of a broad public as a French genre. This is notably thanks to the group of films starring Tautou and also to the success – in this case global – of *L'Arnacoeur*, to whose analysis I shall now turn. From the vantage point of the early 2010s, the genre looks likely to

⁶⁸ For a fuller discussion of the history of perceived economic relations between French films and their remakes see Mazdon (2000: 4-5).

play a crucial role in French cinema's ongoing and partially successful drive to rival Hollywood's commercial success not only at home but also on a global stage.

CASE STUDY: *L'Arnacoeur/Heartbreaker* (Pascal Chaumeil, France/Monaco 2010)

Distributed in multiple territories and achieving a worldwide box office gross in excess of \$44m, as mentioned, television director Pascal Chaumeil's debut feature – written by among others *Prête-moi* co-writer Laurent Zeitoun and American Jeremy Doner and filmed in Monaco and on the Côte d'Azur – has also sold its remake rights to Universal Pictures in the USA. It is, then, first and foremost a transnational text in an industrial sense. Beyond this, its narrative displays a high degree of self-consciousness about its cross-breed status, constantly defining itself in relation to Hollywood and the global rom-com.

The film's pre-credit prologue sequence establishes the complex and subtle relation to acknowledged forefathers that will characterise the narrative. This twelve-minute interlude introduces us to the central protagonist Alex (Romain Duris) in an initially oblique (because we first meet inconsequential secondary characters) but ultimately one-dimensional fashion, as the 'con-artist of the heart' promised by the French title's play on words (*arnaqueur* is a confidence trickster and *coeur* the translation of heart): a kind of gigolo who lures women away from their unsuitable partners. Its status as a broadly comical prelude to the central action, which also telescopes instant character exposition, speaks immediately to contemporary Hollywood comedy. Humour is signalled above all through the sequence's style. For example, at the moment when Alex is shown wooing the girl in question during a heart-warming (staged) humanitarian intervention in an Arabian desert, a cutaway

reveals the contrastingly dull and frustrating experience of her boorish partner who has opted to remain at the hotel in order to witness a wet T-shirt competition that does not materialise. The rapid editing and mobile camera, too, mirror the frenetic pace of intensified continuity, while the tenor of performances is histrionic. It is also performance that first definitively reveals the staged nature of the sequence as a whole, when we see Alex turn away from his female ‘prey’ and pull a grotesque face intended to make him well up into tears [Figure 17]. This single act disrupts any suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience by pointing up the fakery of acting itself, especially in highly conventionalised mainstream genres. In this way it effects the same self-reflexive and distancing action as the whole sequence, whose subject matter is the ability of good looks and charm to seduce us into believing lies, at a speed so breathless no time is left for reflection. In other words, the high production values and ‘advertising’ feel of the photography associated with the exotic setting are revealed as an alluring smokescreen for underlying banality, in this case that of paid work. This denaturalising drive is reinforced by excessive references to convention, as the prologue develops into yet another montage sequence coupled with a male voiceover giving *Manhattan*-esque statistics about women, set to US rap. This sequence’s function is to introduce key secondary characters and to set, partly through to-camera addresses, the ‘rules’ of Alex’s company: a business run with his sister and brother-in-law that involves being paid to prevent women from settling down with partners deemed unsuitable by a close relative or friend. One shot from the images illustrating this *métier* recalls the iconic but itself humorous (because, as Etta James’ ‘I Just Want to make Love to You’ underlines, daringly saucy) advertisement for Diet Coca Cola featuring a workman outside the window of an office full of women. Shortly after, snippets showing Alex

speaking multiple languages including Japanese are designed to elicit a laugh, at such an audacious eschewal of verisimilitude in favour of flashy style. With this dense opening, by the time the intertitle reading '*L'Arnacoeur*' announces the beginning of the main plot, Chaumeil has laid out a by now familiar and typically postmodern new romantic position that at once undercuts conventions *and* seeks to engage the viewer through their deployment.



Figure 17: Foregrounding performance in *L'Arnacoeur*

If Hollywood in general (and secondarily advertising) is pastiche-cum-parodied in the prologue, as the narrative progresses generic references become more specific. When the central project, for Alex to come between heiress Juliette (Vanessa Paradis) and her fiancé Jonathan (Andrew Lincoln), is set up – in order to facilitate a conventional deception scenario via which the two protagonists can be brought together – Chaumeil draws on the resources of the spy film. These include point-of-view shots through a long range camera and a gently suspenseful percussion and strings score, to show Alex's team gathering data on Juliette. Here the parodic element comes from the fact that petite, manicured antiques expert Juliette is a poor stand-in for a dangerous spy. Later in the film, it is the spectacular and violent action sequence whose contrivance is brought to the fore, when Alex's sister Mélanie,

threateningly disguised in a full-face helmet and black leathers on a motorbike, steals Juliette's handbag in an aggressive drive-by incident, in order that Alex – who is masquerading as her bodyguard – can stage the bag's rescue. When Mélanie is unmasked round the corner, all the edge-of-the-seat adrenaline evaporates as the 'mugger's strength and menace is revealed as pure illusion. Furthermore, the pain associated with real violence is graphically demonstrated by Alex's reluctant submission to being punched in the face, in order to provoke a nose-bleed and so lend his escapade authenticity.

However, the fact that this film does not simply scorn Hollywood conventions is apparent in a joke that gently mocks those who pretend to be above mainstream culture: a scene where sophisticated self-styled ice-queen Juliette hides her face because she is unable to resist mouthing the words to Wham!'s 'Jitterbug' on Alex's car radio. Later, too, when the couple discovers their mutual (though in Alex's case invented to match Juliette's) love of classic 1980s rom-com *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, USA 1987), there is a hint of teasing in the disingenuous remark by fully debriefed Alex that he thought she would be more 'art-house' ('*films d'auteur*') – not to mention her admission of her preconceived idea of him as more into action films. It is through the *Dirty Dancing* intertext and in its romantic trajectory in general that the film moves away from laughable parody and into affecting pastiche. For example, in a reversal of the explicit and sometimes distorted uses of known songs I have referred to often in this chapter, at one point here the strains of the signature tune from Ardolino's hit, 'Time of My Life', are discernible as background to a scene showing Alex and Juliette's blossoming relationship. However, the notes are so scattered that, overlaid too with an ambient, mainly string score, they are not intended so much to be recognisable as to lend a revitalised

romantic impression. It is also particularly striking that the climactic romantic exchange between the couple expresses itself through their dance of the finale number from *Dirty Dancing*, which we have earlier witnessed Alex learning in order to seduce Juliette. To heighten the parallelism, the scene is cut in an almost identical way to its predecessor. This is a prime example of the way in which ‘pastiche is compatible with the impression of feeling’ (Dyer 2007: 168): we are supposed to be moved despite our knowledge that this is a set-up. This paradox applies to Alex’s project and characterisation as a whole, which demands that we simultaneously admire or at least engage with his seduction and believe that he at some unspecified point starts falling for Juliette. This well-trodden rom-com narrative path, where a protagonist falls in love through feigned love, in this case invokes transnational models to make the point, not without profundity, that discourses produce realities. Equally determined to ‘have it both ways’ in terms of romance and postmodern self-awareness, the ending is staged around a series of reversals almost as flippant and extreme as those caricatured at the close of *Ma vie n’est pas une comédie romantique*, and also set partly in an airport – Alex decides to return to Juliette rather than board the plane – but this time offered up rather more in earnest, setting up a romantic kiss whose intended iconicity is reinforced by its multiplication across several cuts and camera angles.

Beyond allusions to Hollywood, *L’Arnacoeur* also draws on a host of national stereotypes in revealing ways, primarily through its two leads. The choice of Duris and Paradis is enormously significant in terms of its transnational positioning, particularly bearing in mind remarks by Adrien Thollon, from production company Médiamétrie, detailing how the difficulties which arose in seeking finance for the film centred around questions over Paradis’ bankability (Lutaud 2010), alongside

Zeitoun's wry reflection that the team could have raised the money in a flash with Mathilde Seigner (and French comic giant Kad Merad) (Libiot 2010a). Popular actress Seigner is well-known in France, where Paradis had in 2010 only patchy acting credentials. However, as the producers who stuck to their guns surely understood, Paradis is a global celebrity, both through her persona as a singer and model and above all thanks to her (now broken) marriage to Hollywood superstar Johnny Depp – which, moreover, aligns her with an Anglophone tradition. Additionally, she was known for her rejection of celebrity and as something of an enigma, the couple being famously protective about their private life (see Catroux 2010). This perfectly complements the air of perceived Gallic sophistication that arises notably from her association with the Chanel brand. As for Duris, while he is also a successful actor at home, his lead roles in Klapisch's trans-European narratives *L'Auberge espagnole/Pot Luck* (2002) and *Les Poupées Russes/Russian Dolls* (2005), and to a lesser extent in such exported auteur and mainstream films *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté/The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (Jacques Audiard, France 2005) and *Molière* (Tirard, 2007) have lent him some fame outside France. In the Klapisch films, his Frenchness is axiomatic, representing as he does the Gallic presence in an international mix, while his embodiment of French literary icon Molière extends this association to comprehend national heritage.

L'Arnacoeur plays on both these images. Juliette is cast as unattainable and mysterious, as with unreadable views of her, often in profile, at key moments in Alex's bid to win her over. Her association with Anglophilia, meanwhile, is borne out by her engagement to Briton Jonathan – another 'Anglo-Saxon' other man. There is, too, something of the fiery screwball heroine about her unpredictable heiress persona. Her expertise in antiques and wine and her love of fine dining and Chopin,

meanwhile, feed into the image of elegant Frenchness that suffuses the text as a whole – and, as in *Hors de prix*, exploits the international marketability of French luxury goods and settings. However, this is not the only French stereotype (re-)constructed by the film: it also accommodates an earthier vision, primarily associated with Alex. This character's corporeality, manifested by his bloody nose, is in fact repeatedly palpable in the effort it costs him to achieve impressive and athletic feats, as he comically huffs and puffs, not always making it to the scene of the action in time. On one occasion, when Juliette calls for her bodyguard, he at first does not hear as he is lost in thought having a pee and then, the antithesis of James Bond, swears as he struggles to do up his fly. Interestingly, it is this account of Frenchness as uninhibited that triumphs in this narrative and brings Juliette and Alex together. Not only is it later implied that Paradis' shunning of the spotlight is not about enigmatic posing but rather a down-to-earth disinterest in the trappings of fame, by a scene in which her character mocks the idea of jogging with her bodyguard as 'too Madonna' for her tastes, but Juliette's inner French peasant comes to the fore with the revelation that she eats Roquefort for breakfast. Vincendeau (2010: 245-7) has shown the extent to which this coarse stereotype characterises external views of France propagated by British television and cinema. *L'Arnacoeur*'s bringing together of its central couple through a shared Frenchness that resides in their 'real' conversations about smelly breath and snoring, and in a climactic late night sequence where Juliette, robbed of refinement (and infantilised) in jeans and trainers, announces she must eat, plays up to this transnationally recognisable stereotype.

The flipside of Paradis' recuperation away from her global, partially Anglophone persona is of course disparagement of the latter culture, condensed in

the character of Jonathan. Although the film is for the most part at pains to stress this wrong partner's niceness, alongside such other attributes as his success, wealth and philanthropy, there are telltale fault-lines in this vision. Like Lincoln's symmetrical, blue-eyed but somewhat blandly pleasant appearance, his character is depicted as *too* perfect to be interesting – as Juliette's father tells her near the close, 'he'll bore you to death'. His boy-scout piety is conveyed by the straightforward colour symbolism of his pale and often white attire and his impeccable manners, including towards ostensibly lower-status Alex. What is visibly crushing, though, for the Frenchman, is the Englishman's ability to treat him politely because he clearly sees him, the bodyguard, as irrelevant. This chimes with a wider malaise about France's status in the eyes of a global world headed up by Anglophone (US) culture. For his part, initially the only means polyglot Alex finds to get his own back is to childishy stymie communication between himself and Jonathan, pretending (presumably) not to speak much English, or to understand the Briton's French. Among the few glimpses of Lincoln's character the film gives us, it is no accident that on one occasion we see him washing his face, recalling Rollet's (2008: 101) claim that in France the US (again, Britain here stands in) is associated with excessive cleanliness. This extends to figurative purity, a stereotype invoked by the unsubtle portrayal of Jonathan's parents as uptight – and snobbish – prudes, dismayed to see scantily clad women in a smart hotel. The contrast with licentious Alex's five o'clock stubble, black suits and air of danger could not be greater. Indeed, the suggestion is that it is precisely Alex's imperfections and human weaknesses that render him alluring. Exemplary here is the self-doubt on display when he nervously re-examines his reflection in the mirror, once losing track of Juliette because he is busy posing. The emphasis on Alex's vanity, when combined with Duris' slight physique and his

character's love of and agility in dancing, suggests too his feminisation. This further stereotype of French masculinity exists both outside (Vincendeau 2010: 245-50) and within (see Vincendeau 2000b: 223-30; Mazdon 2000: 59) the country, its most prominent cinematic embodiments including New Wave actors like Jean-Pierre L  aud, Jean-Claude Brialy and Sami Frey. Consequently, the stereotype plays to both audiences.

L'Arnacoeur, second only to *Am  lie* as a French rom-com to make its mark at the international box office, realises in this way the transnational genre's disparate but not necessary conflicting impetuses: to reinvent Frenchness in a global image and to reaffirm Frenchness on the world stage. Perhaps because of its smart textual self-consciousness it was on the whole praised at both the popular and the more cinephilic end of the spectrum, although there were some accusations of 'sanitisation' (Anon 2010a) and a lack of stylistic verve (Anon 2010b). It is an article in *L'Express* comparing this film with the drama *Sturm/Storm* (Hans-Christian Schmid, Germany/Denmark/Netherlands/Sweden/Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2009) that most perceptively comments on the film's transnational generic status, so much so that I will close this analysis by quoting it in full:

Do these films of American ancestry herald a sea-change here [in Europe]? Of course not. National cultural specificity remains – and so much the better for it. But I also applaud to see cinema, a land where imagination and reality exist in harmony, open itself up to diversity. *Which should not be confused with the unstoppable spread of globalisation.* (Libiot 2010b; my emphasis)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has sketched an overview of the French rom-com's position as a genre in relation to which many of the concepts more typically associated with migrant cinemas, such as 'double occupancy' (Elsaesser 2005: 108) and 'accented cinema' (Naficy 2001), apply. While these labels have designated films associated with diasporic and hyphenated identities, whether in the context of cosmopolitan elites or economic migrants, it is no exaggeration to say that today European citizens – like others – occupy more than one identity and that our secondary, 'global' identity is determined principally by the influence, recognisability and cultural currency of US culture.

In the corpus of French films scrutinised here, practices that look like those of Hollywood are ubiquitous and multifarious. The 'parent' genre makes its presence felt most stridently at the levels of style, including narrative organisation and music; plot details; language; and finally reception. Given the particular history of troubled transatlantic interaction between France and the US, it is not surprising that at times hostility is carried over into the genre, such as through the frequency of negatively constructed Anglophone wrong partners in the genre. At least as often, however – and often, too, simultaneously – the French rom-com proclaims the vibrancy of global aesthetic and cultural modes. Moreover the latter observation applies, equally, to some sections of the French press responding to it. While classical Hollywood still holds a sacred place in the cinephilic press, a positive attitude towards contemporary US culture is more often – but not exclusively – discernible in the mainstream and especially more populist publications.

However, the French rom-com cannot simply be thought of within a model of slavish imitation; rather, a drive towards strategic transformation determines many of

its generic parameters. Relevant here is Giddens' description of the process of 'disembedding', which creates global culture and by which he means 'the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space' (1990: 21). The key term here is 'restructuring' with its implied result: a new hybrid identity in which French and global elements are enmeshed, ultimately to the point of indistinction. It cannot be overemphasised to what extent even the most unashamedly 'Hollywood-style' French rom-coms remain markedly French. This is most apparent in their main language and stars, but many films examined in this chapter are also marked by other tendencies specifically identifiable with the French genre, as identified earlier in this thesis. For example, well over half of the films discussed here treat in some form the issue of maternity discussed in Chapter 4, whether through the relationship between the female protagonist and her own mother or daughter or through the issues of pregnancy and childbirth. It is elements like these that bring us back to Ezra and Rowden's description of a transnational perspective as shot through with elements of a national identity that appears simultaneously to be growing stronger and fading away.

On the other hand, few of the films discussed in this chapter contain significantly 'dark' elements of the kind I have identified with French rom-coms, while none of those I have discussed at any length as recognisably globally-informed are based on ensemble structures. Perhaps it is in these features, then, of mixing tones and following multiple protagonists that rom-coms become most truly 'French'.⁶⁹ Certainly ensemble films are markedly less likely to be described as rom-

⁶⁹ Graphic sex scenes are also absent from the more obviously Hollywood-inflected narratives, whereas somewhat more explicit sexual material sometimes features elsewhere in the French genre, as per my discussion of *L'Art (délicat) de la séduction*, or in films like *Embrassez qui vous voudrez* that seek to shock; however this is still not particularly common.

coms in the French press – and among these, those which also contain typically French generic elements, such as rom-com/family film *Le Premier jour du reste de ta vie*, are more likely to be compared with Gallic forefathers (in this case Claude Sautet and Klapisch [Lacomme: 2007]).⁷⁰ This is not to say such films do not participate in romantic comedy, as my analyses of them elsewhere in this thesis attest: rather, there is a sense of the genre's national consolidation over the period in question, and therefore an ease with mixing global and local features. Self-consciously syncretised films such *Les Émotifs Anonymes* and *LOL* suggest that in 2010 the rom-com has by and large been integrated into French filmmaking practice rather than, as yet, entirely seamlessly assimilated.

At the same time, the observation that disembedding creates global culture underlines the extent to which the French rom-com *participates* in the transnational circulation of forms and ideas. With this in mind, a second trend parallels the greater integration of the rom-com as a French form intended to recoup costs at home: its repositioning as a product for export. As discussions of such films as *Décalage horaire* and *L'Arnacoeur* (like the even bigger success of *Amélie*, set in the nostalgically re-imagined Parisian tourist zone of Montmartre) have shown, this may include making cultural difference another sales tool by 'playing up' films' very Frenchness (cf. Wood 2007: 75-82) – a felicitous impulse in the context of a culture already widely associated with romance. Indeed, at the level of marketing, the strap-line to the US DVD cover of *Décalage horaire* contributes further to this strategy,

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A comparison can be drawn here with Vincendeau's (2008) description of how the recently popularised 'auteur comedy' category has been hosted by the choral film in French cinema. This formal marriage can be seen as a way of camouflaging genre, as a concept associated with Hollywood cinema, by embedding its emergence in a notionally French form.

fusing American screwball and French erotic cinematic traditions neatly in the phrase: ‘The battle of the sexes just got sexier’. In the case of *L’Arnacoeur*, one English-language poster was emblazoned with the statement from critic Leonard Maltin that ‘[i]t puts most of Hollywood’s recent romantic comedies to shame and proves that there’s still vibrant life in the genre’; another cited *Vogue*’s pronouncement of the film as ‘utterly chic’. As Steve Fore has put it in a discussion of marketing ‘peripheral’ (primarily Hong Kong) cinemas globally:

In these circumstances (from Benetton’s unthreateningly multicultural fashion ads to “world music” on the order of [sic] Deep Forest’s New Age combinations of synthesizer schmaltz and pygmy chanting), difference is not ignored but foregrounded, though typically only within carefully regulated parameters; these products usually provide only a superficial tourist’s gaze at unfamiliar people, places and beliefs. (Fore 2001: 132-3)

In the two examples he cites, the nominally British James Bond franchise and the Hong Kong martial arts films associated with the performer Jackie Chan, Fore nevertheless argues that films become progressively more Americanised with time, partly in order to appeal to global markets beyond the US but conditioned by its cinema. It will be interesting to see whether a similarly distinctive, internationally-oriented strand of French rom-coms grows up in the wake of recent transnational French successes, within the ‘carefully regulated parameters’ of the romantic comedy genre.

What is clear, though, is the extent to which, in the contemporary cosmopolitan film marketplace, the French rom-com represents another example of a

situation described by Fore in terms of a reconfigured ‘mediascape’ flowing in a direction opposite of the norm. As I have suggested, this is not without precedent in French cinema – from the New Wave and popular post-war cinemas to, more recently, the international success of Luc Besson and his production and distribution company Europacorp (as in, for instance, the *Transporter* franchise). All the same, at this point in its life the French romantic comedy has played a substantial role in the bid by the Hexagon to challenge Hollywood on its own terms, both at home and abroad. Its intervention in the usual flow of films and capital has already dislodged the boundaries of the global genre, reconfiguring the meaning of romantic comedy for global viewers, with implications for both the international fortunes and also the cultural prominence of French cinema.

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis of the contemporary French romantic comedy, during the period from the genre's tentative expansion at the start of the 1990s to its consolidation and firm embedding in the national landscape by the end of the 2000s, has gone a long way towards answering those questions posed in the introduction to the thesis. After summarising in Chapter 1 relevant recent scholarship on romance, romantic comedy and related topics in film studies, especially in France, in Chapter 2 I looked at how the French rom-com intervenes in changes to the status of both patterns of social organisation and romantic and related interpersonal relationships in the contemporary period. Chapter 3 was divided into sections examining how the genre imagines different genders. Chapter 4 focused on the significant group of French rom-coms articulating familial narratives. Finally, in Chapter 5 I looked at the French rom-com as an example of generic exchange in transnational cinema. This conclusion will begin with something close to the obverse of the latter chapter, but also picking up threads from the study as a whole, by isolating certain particularities of the French rom-com. This process provides a way into understanding how the genre mediates social changes in France – the focus of a second section examining its gender politics in relation to such shifts. The thesis will close by placing the genre in both national and global contexts, with an eye on clues as to how the phenomenon of its hugely increased significance in French cinema over the past two decades may develop in future years.

THE FRENCH ROM-COM: NATIONAL SPECIFICITY

Beginning with the primordial issue of the rom-com's French specificity, a wide survey confirms the importance of both melodrama and realism within the genre. The stylistic tropes associated with these modes are moreover complemented – especially in the 2000s – by a focus on the same contemporary issues they tend to work over, such as social fragmentation and/or professional dissatisfaction in the post-technological age, especially in urban settings (*Clara et moi*, *Amélie*, *Irène*, *Mensonges et trahisons*), and the impact of ethnic diversity – alongside occasionally even a tentative turn (back) to religions linked to ethnicities – on interpersonal and romantic relationships (*Dieu est grand*, *Mauvaise foi*). These concerns appear particularly widespread in the French genre by comparison with Hollywood: a function of broader trends in French cinema and society. Important here is France's status as emblematic of an Old Europe that is resistant to the modernisation of, for example, working patterns (as evidenced by 2011's furious revolt over pension reforms). Equally, the nation has a large immigrant population, principally of second and third generation North Africans, helping to explain the slightly increased prominence of interracial romances in rom-coms there in comparison with Hollywood.

A linked formal particularity to emerge in the French genre is the recurrence of multi-protagonist (*choral*) rom-coms, which in turn are associable with the pragmatic sensibility of the discourse of intimacy, as opposed to romance. Although the negative picture of contemporary social reality often portrayed by the genre is predisposed to accentuate the significance of the 'miracle' of falling in love, by contrast intimate conventions relegate the love relationship to the status of one among other possible interpersonal relationships. Sex is therefore on the whole

demystified – although not glossed completely in the manner of some Hollywood new romances – in favour of a pragmatic partnership that is seen as more valuable than physical attraction, in ensemble films and elsewhere (*Ils se marièrent, Ce soir je dors chez toi*). This is in fact quite remarkable given the importance of seduction and (especially feminine) mystique in French culture, now comprising central narrative elements only rarely and usually in a self-knowing way (*Hors de prix*). In fact, while the rom-com generally stops short of simply equating heterosexual partnerships with friendship, this is the direction in which many texts tend. Furthermore, I have argued that intimacy is more dominant in French rom-coms throughout the period than in those made in the US, where the discourse is principally associated with the 1970s and has in many texts been succeeded by more overtly romantic narratives. While the rise of romance in the USA has been seen variously as a function of increased equality (women can now ‘afford’ to indulge in such narratives without concern for damage to their social status with regard to men) and a regressive rejection of sexual egalitarianism, many French rom-com narratives are simply focused on promoting the anti-romantic transparency about relationships associated with greater freedom for women, as it were, in the first place.

One of the most obvious sites in which ‘legitimate’ gender roles prove fundamental is the family unit – a structure that constitutes a lower-order but still striking preoccupation in France. The construction of maternity as highly desirable by the genre – like its portrayal of *familles recomposées* and an attendant interest in child welfare, especially post-2000 – is unsurprising when viewed in the context of similar patterns in French cinema as a whole. Of more interest are the relative absence even today of portraits of fathers who are fulfilled by paternity, and especially the shift that has seen ringing endorsements of motherhood move from

texts by female authors to being more common in those by men (emblematically in *Ma femme est une actrice*). Although motherhood is less common a theme in global rom-coms, once again the trend for men vaunting maternity – markedly in opposition to female professionalism – goes back further in the US, spanning at least the years from iconic 1980s ‘backlash’ film *Baby Boom* (Charles Shyer, 1987, although Nancy Meyers co-wrote) to today - as recently with Tina Fey vehicle *Baby Mama* (Michael McCullers, 2008) - in ways that can once again be linked to women’s earlier progress towards equality, and thus to an earlier ‘backlash’ against it, in that country (although low numbers of female directors in the US make a direct comparison impossible). It is also remarkable that, in France at any rate, in a few films the impulse to be part of a family actually seems to replace romantic desire as a driver for heterosexual coupling (*Au suivant!*, *Le Bison*). There is arguably a French character to such narratives’ stress on the social function of the couple, as opposed to the elevation of the individual typical of global new romances.

Indeed, the influence of the neo-traditional new romance in France is relatively limited. Many French films, from auteur piece *Vénus Beauté* to mainstream hit *Prête-moi ta main*, display the more superficial hallmarks of this old fashioned strand of rom-com. Several texts include apparently conservative celebrations of weddings – as reflected by the very titles of *Mariage Mixte*, *Mariages!* (both 2004) and *Pièce montée* (2010). However, on closer examination such films’ jostling ideologies appear more ambivalent about romantic values. Overall, whether or not it is apt to describe Hollywood rom-coms of the last 20-30 years in terms of regressive ideology, this does not apply in any kind of blanket fashion to the French genre.

GENDER POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE: A GENRE OF CONTRADICTIONS

Homing in on particular issues does, however, throw up a number of revealing facts about the French rom-com's politics, especially in terms of gender, in ways that bring us back to the central issue of the genre's mediation of social change. As one might expect, the most obvious shift is suggestive of the increased freedom and power of French women today.

I have argued from the outset that the rom-com's formal tendency to give ample space to female perspectives – both in terms of subject matter and point of view – already feeds into a movement towards legitimising narratives of female experience in France. It also affords lucrative and culturally significant new opportunities to female stars in national comedy, where their agency is more likely to be accentuated than is the case in most other genres, where female characters have generally been objectified and/or marginalised. As regards *how* the genre depicts female trajectories, it is also important that overall even this narrative form focused on coupling on the whole ratifies the normalcy of female professionalism, including occasionally in fairly high status jobs such as lawyer (*Tout pour plaire*) or politician (*Parlez-moi de la pluie*).

While the importance of the egalitarian dimension of the rom-com should not be underestimated, there are limitations to all these apparent signifiers of progress towards equality. When it comes to constructing women as workers, a number of texts emulate one trend in 'postfeminist' global texts in stressing female dissatisfaction with work, alongside female loneliness connected to the demands of employment (*Au suivant!*, *Irène*). Even if this is not explicit, women's jobs tend to be constructed as an incidental, non-defining aspect of their lives almost across the

board, in films by both men and women. Men's jobs, by contrast, even if they are not the rom-com's main focus, are not belittled – except temporarily in cases where love goes hand in hand with professional self-realisation (*Mensonges et trahisons*, *Ensemble c'est tout*), rather than obviating it, as is typical for female characters (contrast the fates of the two main characters in *Décalage horaire*). It is also the case that the genre's middle-class aspect ignores the most troublesome ongoing inequalities of not only economy (and here the distance from texts associated with realism is apparent) but gender itself. As French sociologist François de Singly (2004: 221-2) has noted, while the sexual revolution has narrowed the professional gap between highly educated men and women, it has increased the gap between the latter and their less educated sisters.

Equally problematic are the concrete images of femininity, and by extension the nature of the female stardom, facilitated by the rom-com. While several 1990s films promoted female comics whose appeal lay in their performance skills first and foremost, later in the period beauty, and being set up as desirable or seductive – as opposed to *principally* charismatic – becomes more important. Although global rom-com stars like Meg Ryan, Julia Roberts, Jennifer Anniston or Katherine Heigl do not deviate substantially from ideals of female attractiveness or slimness, they have generally been seen as relatively attainable, even 'girl-next-door', archetypes. The couture models populating the most prominent examples of the French genre, including extreme waifs like Audrey Tautou, are further removed from everyday life – even if comic elements in their performances somewhat narrow the distance. A sub-trend for unthreatening, childlike visions of femininity incarnated by such actresses as Tautou, Cécile de France and Julie Gayet (and many others, from Marion Cotillard to Mélanie Doutey) also becomes more significant as the genre

takes hold. These are from time to time ‘counterbalanced’ by the presence of older women; but the latter are still (presented as) disproportionately attractive by comparison with observable reality. The spectrum of attractiveness for Frenchmen in rom-com is much wider, including not only physically unremarkable or unconventional-looking figures like Édouard Baer, Romain Duris, Jean Reno or Vincent Elbaz but also ‘plain’ actors such as Alain Chabat and Michel Blanc. The norms of appearance promoted by this genre are particularly significant in that its central project is to construct its protagonists as attractive mating prospects.

There emerges from this picture a remarkable contrast between female rom-com heroines’ presentation as professional women and the genre’s ultimate reliance, in its working over of heterosexual desire, on ‘the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “masculine” and “feminine”’ (Butler 1990: 17). To the extent that such a division provides a barometer of the real state of affairs in contemporary France, this suggests a gulf separating public and private spheres in a country where numbers of working women are increasingly high across most professions (including filmmaking), yet looking good is still today a way of life for women. As I have suggested, the French tendency to place in opposition rather than equate masculinity and femininity is also a key factor in the high birth rate in France, where other European nations’ have declined of late: a further apparent contradiction given women’s increasing penetration of professional walks of life. The difficulty of reconciling these gendered aspects of French social life reflects a cacophony of incompatible notions at play in national culture that has surely influenced the nation’s exceptionally low marriage rate – a major change with respect to its long-term history. Certainly the current situation appears precarious. Notably, the slight decline of female-authored promotions of motherhood in recent rom-coms would

appear to bear out the likely accuracy of Badinter's (2010) prediction that France's high birth rate will not endure the influence of external discourses.⁷¹

The shift in female adhesion to standards of beauty in the French rom-com – alongside a dwindling focus on female desire – is simultaneously inseparable from the genre's increasing masculinisation over the period. This is true first and foremost in the sense that more male directors move into romantic comedy post-2000 and also, secondarily, in the rise of male-focused rom-coms. This parallels but perhaps even outpaces a global shift in this direction. As ever, this is partly due to national trends overlapping with global ones, while still differing from them. Homo-erotica, for one thing, appears more prominent in French texts. At the same time, explicitly queer – and especially lesbian – rom-coms remain for now fairly few and, with the exception of *Gazon maudit* and *Pédale douce*, tend to be 'smaller' films – perhaps more so than in Hollywood, where *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010), dealing centrally with lesbian parenthood, reached a wide global audience. The fact that these two French queer rom-coms enjoyed success in the mid-1990s also suggests their participation in a contemporaneous fad for all things kitsch – as in the work of Almodóvar and Baz Luhrman – rather than a conscious desire to grapple with issues in a profound way. Nonetheless both they and a few texts later in the period do attempt to reconcile the French family with alternative gender positions. Presumably gay-inflected French rom-coms will grow in number with the inevitable (pan-European) progress towards legitimisation of both gay marriage and gay parenting.

⁷¹ Badinter is here referring principally to discourses putting pressure on women to be 'perfect' mothers, but these can themselves be seen as a reaction against, and therefore in a sense part and parcel of, the advancement of discourses of equality.

NORMALISATION NOT NATURALISATION: CRITICAL RECEPTION AND BOX OFFICE

Finally, as regards the genre's own identity, analysis of both film texts and their critical reception suggests a picture of normalisation rather than total naturalisation. While the *comédie romantique française* has become, since around 2006, a standard generic notion in French filmmakers' and cinema-goers' lexicon, this is still very often coloured by a conception of the genre as an immigrant, eliciting different degrees of suspicion or hospitality – the latter, as one might expect, more often within more cinephilic, auteurist circles. However, films less obviously structurally aligned with the Hollywood rom-com – principally ensemble films – that nonetheless contain tropes identifiable with the global rom-com tend to be assimilated as autochthonous. This suggests something of a bifurcation of the genre, between, roughly, French rom-coms and French rom-coms *à l'Américaine*. Given the global success of a handful of French films and the history of similar trends in other exportable world cinemas, it may be that a subgroup of rom-coms for export – comparable to the action and family films for export associated with Besson's EuropaCorp – will emerge from this picture. Delpy's English-language films *2 Days in Paris* (2007) and its sequel *2 Days in New York* (2012) to some extent fit this profile. The recent success of the French 2011 Oscar-winning film *The Artist*, a silent nostalgia piece mobilising several rom-com tropes, could further influence such a move.

Such acknowledgements bring this discussion back to the key commercial importance of the contemporary French genre. Many rom-coms cited in this thesis have featured in the top five French films at the domestic box office every year since 2005 (and intermittently or not far behind in the late 1990s and early 2000s). This

growing popularity should be understood in the context of bumper years in terms of both cinema attendance and French film consumption specifically in France at the end of the 2000s (2008-2011). As Chapter 5 enumerated, several rom-coms have also achieved significant transnational success, feeding into the contemporary push (going back several decades but seemingly increasingly successful) to market not only auteur but popular French cinema successfully abroad. Additionally, Kuisel's argument cited earlier, that France has perceived threats to its national values almost exclusively in terms of US cultural imperialism since 1990 (the moment when rom-com begins to flourish) lends the appropriation and repackaging of a notionally global/Hollywood genre political as well as economic significance. Above all, it should be recognised that adeptness on the part of professionals working in France at reading transnational demand for rom-coms is an important factor in the French film industry's status as the Western world's second largest – one aspect of Gallic cultural life that looks set to remain intact for the foreseeable future.

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Filmography

- Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, USA 1949)
- Agathe Cléry* (Étienne Chatiliez, France 2008)
- Âge d'homme...maintenant ou jamais!, L'* (Raphaël Fejtö, France 2007)
- À la vie, à la mort/'Til Death Do Us Part* (Robert Guédiguian, France 1995)
- Amores Perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, Mexico 1999)
- Apprentis, Les* (Pierre Salavadori, France 1995)
- Arnacoeur, L'/Heartbreaker* (Pascal Chaumeil, France/Monaco 2010)
- Art (délicat) de la séduction, L'* (Richard Berry, France 2001)
- Artist, The* (Michael Hazanavicius, France/Belgium/USA 2011)
- Auberge espagnole, L'/Pot Luck* (Cédric Klapisch, France/Spain 2002)
- Au secours, j'ai trente ans/Last Chance Saloon* (Marie-Anne Chazel, France 2004)
- Au suivant!* (Jeanne Biras, France 2005)
- Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, France/USA/Mexico, 2006)
- Baby Boom* (Charles Shyer, USA 1987)
- Baby Mama* (Michael McCullers, USA 2008)
- Battement d'ailes du papillon, Le/Happenstance* (Laurent Firode, France 2000)
- Beijing Bastards/Beijing Zadhong* (Zhang Yuan, China 1993)
- Belle Maman/Beautiful Mother* (Gabriel Aghion, France 1999)
- Beuze, La/Dope, The* (François Desagnat and Thomas Sorriaux, France 2003)
- Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chada, UK 1993)
- Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis/Welcome to the Sticks* (Dany Boon, France 2008)
- Bison (et sa voisine Dorine), Le* (Isabelle Nanty, France 2003)
- Border Line* (Danièle Dubroux, France/Switzerland 1992)
- Boum, La/Ready for Love* (Claude Pinoteau, France 1980)

- Brice de Nice/Brice Man, The* (James Huth, France 2005)
- Bronzés, Les/French Fried Vacation* (Patrice Chéreau, 1978)
- Bûche, La/Season's Beatings* (Danièle Thompson, France 1999)
- Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, USA 1942)
- Ce soir, je dors chez toi/Tonight I'll Sleep at Yours* (Olivier Baroux, France 2007)
- Ce soir ou jamais/Tonight or Never* (Michel Deville, France 1961)
- Celebration, The/Festen* (Thomas Vinterberg, Denmark 1998)
- Célibataires* (Jean-Michel Verner, France 2006)
- Celle que j'aime/The One I Love* (Élie Chouraqui, France 2009)
- Cet obscur objet du désir/That Obscure Object of Desire* (Luis Buñuel, France/Spain, 1977)
- Chacun cherche son chat/When the Cat's Away* (Cédric Klapisch, France 1996)
- Choristes, Les/Chorus, The* (Christophe Barratier, France/Switzerland/Germany 2004)
- Chouchou* (Merzak Allouache, France 2003)
- Circle, The/Dayereh, Le* (Jafar Panahi, Iran/Italy/Switzerland 2000)
- Clara et moi/Clara and Me* (Arnaud Viard, France 2004)
- Cliente/A French Gigolo* (Josiane Balasko, France 2008)
- Club de femmes/Girls' Club* (Jacques Deval, France 1936)
- Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, USA 1995)
- Coco avant Chanel/Coco Before Chanel* (Anne Fontaine, France/Belgium 2009)
- Code a changé, Le/Change of Plans* (Danièle Thompson, France 2009)
- Code inconnu/Code Unknown* (Michael Haneke, France 2000)
- Coeur des hommes, Le /Frenchmen 1* (Marc Esposito, France 2003)
- Coeur des hommes 2, Le /Frenchmen 2* (Marc Esposito, France 2007)

- Comme les autres/Baby Love* (Vincent Garenq, France 2008)
- Crise, La/Crisis, The* (Coline Serreau, France/Italy 1992)
- Crustacés et coquillages/Cockles and Muscles* (Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 2005)
- Dan in Real Life* (Peter Hedges, USA 2007)
- De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté/The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (Jacques Audiard, France 2005)
- De l'autre côté du lit/Changing Sides* (Pascale Pouzadoux, France 2008)
- De vrais mensonges/Beautiful Lies* (Pierre Salvadori, France 2010)
- Décalage horaire/Jet Lag* (Danièle Thompson, France/UK 2002)
- Détrompez-vous* (Bruno Dega, France 2007)
- Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite/God is Great and I'm Not* (Pascale Bailly, France 2001)
- Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, USA 1987)
- Dis-moi oui* (Alexandre Arcady, France 1995)
- Divorces!* (Valérie Guignabodet, France 2009)
- Doublure, La /Valet, The* (Francis Veber, France/Italy/Belgium 2006)
- Drôle de Félix/ Adventures of Felix* (Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, France 2000)
- Embrassez qui vous voudrez/Summer Things* (Michel Blanc, France/UK/Italy 2002)
- Les Émotifs anonymes* (Jean-Pierre Améris, France 2010)
- Ensemble, c'est tout/Hunting and Gathering* (Claude Berri, France 2007)
- Essaye-moi* (Pierre-François Martin-Laval, France 2006)
- Et toi, t'es sur qui?/Just About Love?* (Lola Doillon, France 2007)
- Ex-femme de ma vie, L'/Ex-Wife of my Life, The* (Josiane Balasko, France 2004)

Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain, Le/Amélie (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, France/Germany 2001)

Fauteuils d'orchestre/Orchestra Seats (Danièle Thompson, France 2006)

Filles perdues, cheveux gras/Hypnotized and Hysterical (Hairstylist Wanted)
(Claude Duty, France 2002)

Flowers of Shanghai/ Hai shang hua (Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan 1998)

Four Weddings and a Funeral (Mike Newell, UK 1994)

Fred (Pierre Jolivet, France 1997)

French Kiss (Lawrence Kasdan, UK/USA 1995)

Gazon maudit/French Twist (Josiane Balasko, France 1995)

Goût des autres, Le/Taste of Others, The (Agnès Jaoui, France 2001)

Haine, La (Mathieu Kassovitz, France 1995)

Hérisson, Le /Hedgehog, The (Mona Achache, France/Italy 2009)

He's Just Not That into You (Ken Kwapis, USA/Germany/Netherlands 2009)

Heure d'été, L'/Summer Hours (Olivier Assayas, France 2008)

Homme de chevet, L' (Alain Monne, France 2009)

Homme est une femme comme les autres, L'/Man is a Woman (Jean-Jacques Zilbermann, France 1998)

Hors de prix/Priceless (Pierre Salvadori, France 2006)

Husbands and Wives (Woody Allen, USA 1992)

I Love You, Man (John Hamburg, USA 2009)

Ice Storm, The (Ang Lee, USA 1996)

Il est plus facile pour un chameau.../It's Easier for a Camel... (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, France/Italy 2003)

Il ne faut jurer...de rien! (Eric Civanyan, France 2005)

Ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d'enfants/And They Lived Happily Ever After
(Yvan Attal, France 2004)

Intouchables/Untouchable (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, France 2011)

Irène (Ivan Calbérac, France 2002)

It Happened One Night (Frank Capra, USA 1934)

It's Complicated (Nancy Meyers, USA 2009)

Je crois que je l'aime/Could This Be Love? (Pierre Jolivet, France 2007)

Je ne suis pas là pour être aimé/Not Here To Be Loved (Stéphane Brizé, France
2005)

Je préfère qu'on reste amis (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, France 2005)

Je reste!/I'm staying! (Diane Kurys, France 2003)

Je vais te manquer/You'll Miss Me (Amanda Sthers, France 2009)

Je vous trouve très beau/You are so Beautiful (Isabelle Mergault, France 2006)

Jeux de l'amour, Les /Games of Love, The (Philippe de Broca, France 1960)

J'me sens pas belle (Bernard Jeanjean, France 2004)

Jules et Jim/Jules and Jim (François Truffaut, 1962)

Jupon Rouge, Le/Manuela's Loves (Geneviève Lefebvre, France 1987)

Jusqu'à toi (Jennifer Devoldère, France/Canada, 2009)

Kate and Leopold (James Mangold, USA 2001)

Kids Are All Right, The (Lisa Cholodenko, USA 2010)

Kramer vs. Kramer (Robert Benton, USA 1979)

Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches/Leave Your Hands on My Hips (Chantal Lauby,
France 2003)

Let's Hope It's a Girl/Speriamo che sia femmina (Mario Monicelli, Italy/France 1986)

Life According to Agfa/Ha Chayim Aply Agfa (Assi Dayan, Israel 1992)

Lol (Laughing Out Loud) (Lisa Azuelos, France 2008)

Love Actually (Richard Curtis, UK/USA 2003)

Ma femme est une actrice/My Wife is an Actress (Yvan Attal, France 2001)

Ma vie en l'air (Rémi Bezançon, France 2005)

Ma vie est un enfer/My Life is Hell (Josiane Balasko, France 1991)

Ma vie n'est pas une comédie romantique/It Had to Be You (Marc Gibaja, France 2007)

Made in Hong Kong/Xianggang Zhiao (Fruit Chan, Hong Kong 1997)

Mademoiselle Chambon (Stéphane Brizé, France 2009)

Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson, USA 2000)

Maid in Manhattan (Wayne Wang, USA 2002)

Manhattan (Woody Allen, USA 1979)

Mariage Mixte (Alexandre Arcady, France 2004)

Mariages! (Valérie Guignabodet, France 2004)

Marmottes, Les/Groundhogs, The (Élie Chouraqui, France 1993)

Mauvaise foi/Bad Faith (Roschdy Zem, France/Belgium, 2006)

Mensonges et trahisons et plus si affinités/The Story of My Life (Laurent Tirard, 2002)

Merci la vie (Bertrand Blier, France 1991)

Micmacs à tire-larigot/Micmacs (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, France 2009)

Midnight in Paris (Woody Allen, USA 2011)

Modern Love (Stéphane Kazandjian, France 2008)

Molière (Laurent Tirard, France 2007)

Môme, La / La Vie en rose (Olivier Dahan, France/UK/Czech Republic 2007)

Mostly Martha/Bella Martha (Sandra Nettelbeck, Germany/Austria/Switzerland/Italy 2001)

Music and Lyrics (Marc Lawrence, USA 2007)

My Best Friend's Wedding (P.J. Hogan, USA 1997)

Nelly (Laure Duthilleul, France 2004)

Notting Hill (Roger Michell, UK/USA 1999)

Nouvelle Ève, La/New Eve, The (Catherine Corsini, France/Portugal 1999)

On connaît la chanson/Same Old Song (Alain Resnais, France/UK/Switzerland 1997).

Osmose (Raphael Fejtö, France 2003)

Où avais-je la tête? (Nathalie Donnini, France 2007)

Palais Royal! (Valérie Lemercier, France 2005)

Parenthood (Ron Howard, USA 1989)

Parlez-moi de la pluie/Let's Talk About the Rain (Agnès Jaoui, France 2008)

Passe-passe/Off and Running (Tonie Marshall, France 2008)

Pédale douce (Gabriel Aghion, France 1996)

Pièce Montée/Wedding Cake, The (Denys Granier-Deferre, France 2010)

Placard, Le/Closet, The (Francis Veber, France 2001)

Plus beau métier du monde, Le/The Best Job in the World (Gérard Lauzier, France 1996)

Post coïtum animal triste/After Sex (Brigitte Roüan, France 1997)

Poupées Russes, Les/Russian Dolls (Cédric Klapisch, France/UK 2005)

- Pourquoi pas moi?/Why Not Me?* (Stéphane Giusti, France 1999)
- Premier jour du reste de ta vie, Le* (Rémi Bezançon, France 2008)
- Prête-moi ta main/I Do* (Eric Lartigau, France 2006)
- Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, USA 1990)
- Princess and the Warrior, The /Krieger und die Kaiserin, Der* (Tom Tykwer, Germany 2001)
- Quand j'étais chanteur/The Singer* (Xavier Giannoli, France 2006)
- Quand la mer monte/When the Sea Rises* (Yolande Moreau, Gilles Porte, France 2004)
- Quatre cents coups, Les/400 Blows, The* (François Truffaut, France 1959)
- Quatre étoiles* (Christian Vincent, France 2006)
- Question humaine, La/Heartbeat Detector* (Nicolas Klotz, France 2007)
- Reines d'un jour/Hell of a Day* (Marion Vernoux, France 2001)
- Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, USA 1992)
- Résultats du féminisme, Les/Consequences of Feminism, The* (Alice Guy, France 1906)
- Rien à déclarer/Nothing to Declare* (Dany Boon, France 2010)
- Rocco and His Brothers/Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Luchino Visconti, Italy/France 1960)
- Roman de Lulu, Le* (Pierre-Olivier Scotto, France 2001)
- Romuald et Juliette/Mama, There's a Man in Your Bed* (Coline Serreau, France 1989)
- Se souvenir des belles choses/Beautiful Memories* (Zabou Breitman, France 2001)
- Sex and the City: The Movie* (Michael Patrick King, USA 2008)
- Sex and the City 2* (Michael Patrick King, USA 2008)

- Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, USA 1993)
- Si c'était lui/Perfect Match* (Anne-Marie Étienne, France 2007)
- Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi/Beware of my Love* (Jeanne Labrune, France 2002)
- Singles* (Cameron Crowe, USA 1992)
- Sinon, oui* (Claire Simon, France/Canada, 1997)
- Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, USA 1993)
- Smoking/No Smoking* (Alain Resnais, France/Italy/Switzerland 1993)
- Someone Like You* (Tony Goldwyn, USA 2001)
- Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers, USA 2003)
- Storm/Sturm* (Hans-Christian Schmid,
Germany/Denmark/Netherlands/Sweden/Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2009)
- Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, USA 1941)
- Superbad* (Greg Mottola, USA 2007)
- Swamp, The /Ciénaga, La* (Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/France/Spain 2001)
- Tellement proches* (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, France 2009)
- Tenue de soirée/Ménage* (Bertrand Blier, France 1986)
- There's Something About Mary* (Bobby and Peter Farrelly, USA 1998)
- Tirez sur le pianiste/Shoot the Piano Player!* (François Truffaut, France 1960)
- Toi et moi* (Julie Lopes-Curval, France 2006)
- Tôt ou tard/Sooner or Later* (Anne-Marie Étienne, France 1999)
- Tout ce qui brille/All That Glitters* (Hervé Mimram and Géraldine Nakache, France
2010)
- Toutes les filles sont folles/All Girls are Crazy* (Pascale Pouzadoux, France 2003)
- Tout pour plaire* (Cécile Telerman, France/Belgium 2005)
- Transporter, The* (Louis Leterrier and Corey Yuen, France/USA 2003)

- Transporter 2* (Louis Leterrier, France/USA 2005)
- Transporter 3* (Olivier Megaton, France/UK/USA 2008)
- Tricheuse/So Woman!* (Jean-François Davy, France 2009)
- Trois hommes et un couffin/Three Men and a Cradle* (Coline Serreau, France 1985)
- Trop belle pour toi/Too Beautiful For You* (Bertrand Blier, France 1989)
- Truth About Cats and Dogs, The* (Michael Lehmann, USA 1996)
- Un air de famille/Family Resemblances* (Cédric Klapisch, France 1996)
- Un bonheur n'arrive jamais seul/Happiness Never Comes Alone* (James Huth, France 2012)
- Un divan à New York/A Couch in New York* (Chantal Akerman, USA 1996)
- Un grand cri d'amour* (Josiane Balasko, France 1998)
- Un week-end sur deux/Every Other Weekend* (Nicole Garcia, France 1990)
- Une semaine sur deux (et la moitié des vacances scolaires)* (Ivan Calbérac, France 2009)
- Une vie à t'attendre* (Thierry Klifa, France 2004)
- Vénus Beauté (Institut)/Venus Beauty Salon* (Tonie Marshall, France 1999)
- Vérité ou presque, La/True Enough* (Sam Karmann, France 2007)
- Visiteurs, Les* (Jean-Marie Poiré, France 1993)
- Voleurs, Les/Thieves* (André Téchiné, France 1996)
- Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, USA 2005)
- When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, USA 1989)
- Women, The* (George Cukor, USA 1939)
- Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, USA 1988)
- Y'aura t'il de la neige à Noël?/Will It Snow for Christmas?* (Sandrine Veysset, France 1996)

Zèbre, Le/The Oddball (Jean Poiret, France 1992)

2 Days in New York (Julie Delpy, Germany/France/Belgium 2012)

2 Days in Paris (Julie Delpy, France/Germany 2007)

5x2 (François Ozon, France 2004)

8 Femmes/8 Women (François Ozon, France/Italy 2002)

40 Year Old Virgin, The (Judd Apatow, USA 1996)

71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance/71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls (Michael Haneke, Austria/Germany 1994)

500 Days of Summer (Marc Webb, USA 2009)

Television programmes

Absolutely Fabulous (French and Saunders Productions/BBC/Comedy

Central/Oxygen Media, 1992-2012)

Ally McBeal (20th Century Fox Television/David E. Kelley Productions, 1997-2002)

Dallas (Lorimar Productions/Lorimar Television, 1978-1991)

Desperate Housewives (Cherry Alley Productions/Cherry Productions/Touchstone Television/ABC Studios, 2004-2012)

Golden Girls, The (Touchstone Television/Witt/Thomas/Harris Productions, 1985-1992)

Une femme en blanc (Escazal Films, 1997)

Sex and the City (Darren Star Productions/ HBO/Sex and the City Productions, 1998 -2004)

Sous le soleil (TF1, 1996-2008)

Star Trek (Desilu Productions/Norway Corporation/Paramount Television, 1966-1969)

French Rom-Com Filmography 1990-2010

- Âge d'homme...maintenant ou jamais!, L'* (Raphaël Fejtö, France 2007)
- Amour, c'est mieux à deux, L'/The Perfect Date* (Dominique Farrugia and Arnaud Lemort, France 2010)
- Apprentis, Les* (Pierre Salavadori, France 1995) C
- Arnacoeur, L'/Heartbreaker* (Pascal Chaumeil, France/Monaco 2010)
- Art (délicat) de la séduction, L'* (Richard Berry, France 2001)
- Au secours, j'ai trente ans/Last Chance Saloon* (Marie-Anne Chazel, France 2004) C
- Au suivant!* (Jeanne Biras, France 2005)
- Battement d'ailes du papillon, Le/Happenstance* (Laurent Firode, France 2000)
- Belle Maman/Beautiful Mother* (Gabriel Aghion, France 1999) Co-written with Danièle Thompson
- Bison (et sa voisine Dorine), Le* (Isabelle Nanty, France 2003)
- Bûche, La/Season's Beatings* (Danièle Thompson, France 1999) C
- Ce soir, je dors chez toi/Tonight I'll Sleep at Yours* (Olivier Baroux, France 2007)
- Célibataires* (Jean-Michel Verner, France 2006) C
- Celle que j'aime/The One I Love* (Élie Chouraqui, France 2009)
- Chance de ma vie, La* (Nicolas Cuche, France/Belgium 2010)
- Changement d'adresse/Change of Address* (Emmanuel Mouret, France 2006)
- Chouchou* (Merzak Allouache, France 2003)
- Clara et moi/Clara and Me* (Arnaud Viard, France 2004)
- Cliente/A French Gigolo* (Josiane Balasko, France 2008) C
- Code a changé, Le/Change of Plans* (Danièle Thompson, France 2009) C
- Coeur des hommes, Le /Frenchmen 1* (Marc Esposito, France 2003) C
- Coeur des hommes 2, Le /Frenchmen 2* (Marc Esposito, France 2007) C
- Comme les autres/Baby Love* (Vincent Garenq, France 2008)
- Crustacés et coquillages/Cockles and Muscles* (Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 2005) C
- De l'autre côté du lit/Changing Sides* (Pascale Pouzadoux, France 2008) C

De vrais mensonges/Beautiful Lies (Pierre Salvadori, France 2010)

Décalage horaire/Jet Lag (Danièle Thompson, France/UK 2002)

Détrompez-vous (Bruno Dega, France 2007) **C**

Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite/God is Great and I'm Not (Pascale Bailly, France 2001)

Dieu, que les femmes sont amoureuses (Magali Clément, France 1994)

Dis-moi oui (Alexandre Arcady, France 1995)

Divorces! (Valérie Guignabodet, France 2009)

Embrassez qui vous voudrez/Summer Things (Michel Blanc, France/UK/Italy 2002)

C

Les Émotifs anonymes (Jean-Pierre Améris, France 2010)

Ensemble, c'est tout/Hunting and Gathering (Claude Berri, France 2007) Based on the novel by Anna Gavalda **C**

Enfin Veuve/A Widow at Last (Isabelle Mergault, France 2007)

Essaye-moi (Pierre-François Martin-Laval, France 2006)

Ex-femme de ma vie, L'/Ex-Wife of my Life, The (Josiane Balasko, France 2004)

Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain, Le/Amélie (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, France/Germany 2001)

Fauteuils d'orchestre/Orchestra Seats (Danièle Thompson, France 2006) **C**

Filles perdues, cheveux gras/Hypnotized and Hysterical (Hairstylist Wanted) (Claude Duty, France 2002) Co-written with Pascale Faure **C**

Gazon maudit/French Twist (Josiane Balasko, France 1995)

Goût des autres, Le/Taste of Others, The (Agnès Jaoui, France 2001) **C**

Homme de chevet, L' (Alain Monne, France 2009)

Homme est une femme comme les autres, L'/Man is a Woman (Jean-Jacques Zilbermann, France 1998)

Hors de prix/Priceless (Pierre Salvadori, France 2006)

Il ne faut jurer...de rien! (Eric Civanyan, France 2005)

Ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d'enfants/And They Lived Happily Ever After

(Yvan Attal, France 2004) **C**

Irène (Ivan Calbérac, France 2002)

Je crois que je l'aime/Could This Be Love? (Pierre Jolivet, France 2007)

Je ne suis pas là pour être aimé/Not Here To Be Loved (Stéphane Brizé, France

2005) Co-written with Juliette Salles

Je préfère qu'on reste amis (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, France 2005) **C**

Je reste!/I'm staying! (Diane Kurys, France 2003)

Je vais te manquer/You'll Miss Me (Amanda Sthers, France 2009) **C**

Je vous trouve très beau/You are so Beautiful (Isabelle Mergault, France 2006)

J'me sens pas belle (Bernard Jeanjean, France 2004)

Jusqu'à toi (Jennifer Devoldère, France/Canada, 2009)

J'veux pas que tu t'en ailles/Please don't go (Bernard Jeanjean, France 2007)

Laisse tes mains sur mes hanches/Leave Your Hands on My Hips (Chantal Lauby,

France 2003)

Lol (Laughing Out Loud) (Lisa Azuelos, France 2008) **C**

Ma femme est une actrice/My Wife is an Actress (Yvan Attal, France 2001)

Ma vie en l'air (Rémi Bezançon, France 2005)

Ma vie est un enfer/My Life is Hell (Josiane Balasko, France 1991)

Ma vie n'est pas une comédie romantique/It Had to Be You (Marc Gibaja, France

2007)

Mademoiselle Chambon (Stéphane Brizé, France 2009) Co-written with Florence

Vignon

Mariage Mixte (Alexandre Arcady, France 2004)

Mariages! (Valérie Guignabodet, France 2004) **C**

Marmottes, Les/Groundhogs, The (Élie Chouraqui, France 1993) Co-written with

Danièle Thompson **C**

Mauvaise foi/Bad Faith (Roschdy Zem, France/Belgium, 2006)

Mensonges et trahisons et plus si affinités/The Story of My Life (Laurent Tirard, 2002)

Mes amis, mes amours/London mon amour (Lorraine Levy, France 2008) **C**

Modern Love (Stéphane Kazandjian, France 2008) **C**

Nouvelle Ève, La/New Eve, The (Catherine Corsini, France/Portugal 1999)

Odette Toulemonde (Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, France/Belgium 2006)

On connaît la chanson/Same Old Song (Alain Resnais, France/UK/Switzerland 1997) Co-written with Agnès Jaoui **C**

On va s'aimer (Ivan Calbérac, France 2006) **C**

Osmose (Raphael Fejtö, France 2003) **C**

Où avais-je la tête? (Nathalie Donnini, France 2007)

Palais Royal! (Valérie Lemerrier, France 2005)

Parlez-moi de la pluie/Let's Talk About the Rain (Agnès Jaoui, France 2008) **C**

Passe-passe/Off and Running (Tonie Marshall, France 2008)

Pédale douce (Gabriel Aghion, France 1996) **C**

Pièce Montée/Wedding Cake, The (Denys Granier-Deferre, France 2010) Based on a novel by Blandine Le Callet **C**

Plus beau métier du monde, Le/The Best Job in the World (Gérard Lauzier, France 1996)

Pourquoi pas moi?/Why Not Me? (Stéphane Giusti, France 1999) **C**

Premier jour du reste de ta vie, Le (Rémi Bezançon, France 2008) **C**

Prête-moi ta main/I Do (Eric Lartigau, France 2006)

Quand j'étais chanteur/The Singer (Xavier Giannoli, France 2006)

- Quand la mer monte/When the Sea Rises* (Yolande Moreau, Gilles Porte, France 2004)
- Quatre étoiles* (Christian Vincent, France 2006)
- Regrets, Les/Regrets* (Cédric Kahn, France 2009)
- Reines d'un jour/Hell of a Day* (Marion Vernoux, France 2001) **C**
- Roman de Lulu, Le* (Pierre-Olivier Scotto, France 2001)
- Se souvenir des belles choses/Beautiful Memories* (Zabou Breitman, France 2001)
- Si c'était lui/Perfect Match* (Anne-Marie Étienne, France 2007)
- Smoking/No Smoking* (Alain Resnais, France/Italy/Switzerland 1993) Co-written with Agnès Jaoui **C**
- Tellement proches* (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, France 2009) **C**
- Toi et moi* (Julie Lopes-Curval, France 2006) **C**
- Tôt ou tard/Sooner or Later* (Anne-Marie Étienne, France 1999)
- Tout ce qui brille/All That Glitters* (Hervé Mimram and Géraldine Nakache, France 2010) **C**
- Toutes les filles sont folles/All Girls are Crazy* (Pascale Pouzadoux, France 2003) **C**
- Tout pour plaire* (Cécile Telerman, France/Belgium 2005) **C**
- Tu vas rire mais je te quitte* (Philippe Harel, France 2005)
- Tricheuse/So Woman!* (Jean-François Davy, France 2009)
- Un air de famille/Family Resemblances* (Cédric Klapisch, France 1996) Co-written with Agnès Jaoui **C**
- Un baiser s'il vous plaît/Shall We Kiss?* (Emmanuel Mouret, France 2007)
- Un divan à New York/A Couch in New York* (Chantal Akerman, USA 1996)
- Un grand cri d'amour* (Josiane Balasko, France 1998)
- Une semaine sur deux (et la moitié des vacances scolaires)* (Ivan Calbérac, France 2009) **C**
- Une vie à t'attendre* (Thierry Klifa, France 2004)
- Vénus Beauté (Institut)/Venus Beauty Salon* (Tonie Marshall, France 1999) **C**

Vérité ou presque, La/True Enough (Sam Karmann, France 2007) C

Virilité et autres sentiments modernes/Manhood and Other Modern Dilemmas

(Ronan Girre, France 2000)

Zèbre, Le/The Oddball (Jean Poiret, France 1992)

2 Days in Paris (Julie Delpy, France/Germany 2007)